

Chapter 1

Harry Potter had to admit that in many ways his first week at the Dursleys following his third year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry that the peace and relative quiet afforded in Little Whinging was exactly what he needed. In many ways, the past year had been the best in his life. He found out more about his parents, discovered the truth about his parents' betrayal, and saved his godfather in the process. Only one thing would have made the year more fulfilling, if Sirius had been freed and allowed to carry through on his promise of asking Harry to live with him.

If the Dursleys allowed him one thing it was an abundance of time to think as he did the mindless chores of the household and garden outside. Harry realized something very important about his first three years at Hogwarts, muddling his way through an adventure with Hermione and Ron would be a lot safer and easier if he had only paid attention more.

First year, he realized that his scar hurt when both Quirrel and Snape had been near, but he had assumed it was Snape and discounted the possibility of Quirrel. His assumption of Snape without paying attention to all of the signs had nearly cost him his life at the end of the year. Note to self don't make any stupid assumptions based upon your emotions alone.

Second year, if he had helped Hermione more in searching for the monster she likely would have been spared petrification. Likewise, just keeping his eyes open he would have seen the telltale signs of exhaustion from Ginny Weasley and perhaps known to keep a closer eye on her. Keep his eyes open for strange behavior and be wary of potential threats.

The past year, he would have noticed Hermione's use of the time turner without too much difficulty if only he had paid attention. Malfoy wouldn't have been attacked by Buckbeak if he had been paying attention, which only added the strain of the hippogriffs trial and subsequent rescue that fateful night. Seeing Peter Pettigrew's name on the map should have been more of a source of concern, and

realizing it was a full moon could have meant that Sirius was free at the moment instead of on the run in god knows what place. Being aware of the circumstances helps a lot when dealing with very important things.

With this in mind Harry vowed to keep his eyes open and brain working to avoid the mistakes of the past. It has been the favorite saying of one of his teachers at Muggle School, "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Harry now realized the wisdom of the statement and vowed that in his life being blind to the obvious wouldn't happen any more.

With all of this in mind, it had only been about ten days since his return from Hogwarts and as he sat in the back garden of his relatives' house he realized he wanted to write a few letters to his friends and clear the air.

Harry was broken from his thoughts as his Aunt Petunia screeched, "Potter, once you're finished pruning the rose bed come inside and help me cook dinner."

Harry's own stomach rumbled as he thought of dinner, he could only hope that Vernon and Dudley would leave him some food on the table once they were finished with their troughs. Harry chuckled at the thought before he dusted his hands off as he inspected his work. With an appraising nod he headed back to the house through the back door to help his Aunt Petunia to cook dinner.

After watching the Dursleys eat all of the food aside from a few pieces of bread and some pudding, Harry eagerly sat down and ate the leftovers from the meal before he sat about doing the dishes. By the time Harry had completely finished his hands were sore from a full day of work in the garden and the house. Petunia screamed from the living room as the Dursleys were watching a commercial during their favorite program, "Potter, once you're done with the dishes go up to your room Vernon doesn't want to see your face any more today."

Harry frowned and muttered under his breath, "The feeling is mutual you lard ass." Harry stomped up the stairs and slammed the door to

his room behind him, feeling quite sick and tired of one Vernon Dursley.

Harry sat down heavily on his small bed before he sat up and grabbed a couple of pieces of parchment so that he could begin writing to his friends. His first letter was the longer one and it was to Hermione:

Hermione,

Man it has been a strange summer already. The Dursleys have been a little bit better, and I've even found the time to do some of my summer homework. Although I still might need your help with my potions essay.

You always complain to Ron and me about not writing enough during the summer, so this letter is my way of making it up to you a little. I've been thinking a lot the past few days and I realized I never really thanked you for being such a good friend. Ron and I would be rubbish without you, and I'm sorry I haven't done everything I could to show you that. I'm sorry for being so rude about the firebolt thing. It's just that it was the first time I ever got a gift from someone with no strings attached. I appreciate all of the gifts I've gotten from you and the Weasleys, but you're supposed to get gifts for friends, you know? The firebolt was, I don't know, different because of that.

I'm sure that this probably doesn't make any sense but I just wanted to try to explain it to you. I wouldn't have fought you on it if you had told me before taking the broom. I really didn't fancy another fall from a broom either. Anyways, if you write me back I promise to reply as soon as Hedwig is up to making the delivery.

Hope you're having a good summer,

Harry

After he read through the letter Harry rolled the parchment up and tied it snugly before he began his letter to Ron:

Ron,

Hey mate, how is your summer going? Probably not as exciting as your trip to Egypt last summer I wager. I just wanted to write and say hi and maybe share a talk about Quidditch for this next season. Fred and George told me that you thought about trying out for Wood's spot next year. If you do that would be wicked mate. With me at seeker, Fred and George at beater, the girls at chaser and you at keeper we'd definitely win the cup. Well, write me back when you get a chance mate.

Harry

Hedwig took the owl treat from Harry's hand as he tied the two letters to Hedwig's leg and murmured to his friend, "Take the letter to Ron first Hedwig. You don't need to wait for a reply from him. But, please wait to see if Hermione wants to write back ok?" Hedwig nipped at his fingers affectionately before she took off into the night sky headed towards Ottery St. Catchpole and the burrow.

Three days passed before Hedwig returned, Harry had already received a quick response from Ron that vaguely mentioned something about the Quidditch World Cup. Hermione's letter on the other hand was considerably more loaded.

Harry,

Oh, I'm so happy to hear from you, even if you are writing out of obligation (not that you were). Apparently we aren't really going on a vacation this year; because my mum and dad told me that the Weasley's had contacted them about something at the end of August that you and I were invited to.

You never have to thank me for being your friend Harry, but I appreciate it nonetheless. I understand why you were so upset now about the firebolt and I don't blame you one bit, now Ron on the other hand will probably never apologize for being wrong about that and "Scabbers". Why I put up with that boy sometimes, I'll never know.

I'm so proud of you normally you put off your summer homework until we get to Hogwarts. I promise I'll help with your potions essay, it is rather tricky.

Just imagine what you can do with all of the spare time at the beginning of the year without any homework to do. Maybe you can even start looking for a girlfriend to pass some time. I know a lot of girls that fancy you including a certain Weasley, and no I don't mean Ron.

If you want, write me back soon and we'll keep in touch over the entire summer. If you'd like I'll even proofread your homework if you send it with Hedwig. If not I'll see you later this summer at the burrow for whatever it is we're doing.

Love,

Hermione

Harry smiled upon finishing his reading and made a mental note to write Hermione and Ron back in a couple of days. He looked around his room and with a start realized that it was Tuesday meaning that he had a day off from chores.

With a grunt Harry rolled out of bed and headed towards the shower, determined to do something constructive with his day off from servitude at the Dursleys. After he finished his shower Harry frowned as he looked at his baggy clothes in the mirror before his eyes widened with a thought. Harry rushed back to his room and pleaded with Hedwig to take a letter to Hermione after he had taken his measurements from a small sewing kit his Aunt Petunia had given him so that he could hold Dudley's old clothes together. As Hedwig flew out the window Harry began phase two of his plan to accomplish something for the summer.

Harry found a tattered pair of sweat pants to go with an old tank top from his "new" clothes pile and laced up his beat up trainers before jogging down the stairs and outside to get some exercise in lieu of anything better to do.

Harry took off down the street and waved at Ms. Figg, who was out on a walk with her cats, as he passed. Harry was well aware that Dudley, or 'Big D' as he was called, was with his gang down at the park so he went in the opposite direction to avoid a confrontation. Harry crossed Wisteria Walk and turned left away from the park and

towards Magnolia road starting to sweat already from exertion. Fortunately, Hermione lived in Kensington, which wasn't more than a two hour flight for Hedwig meaning he would at least have some idea of what Hermione's response would be.

By the time Harry had finished his run he returned to Privet Drive tired but rather happy from the exercise induced endorphins coursing through his body. So Harry was quite surprised when he entered Number 4 and his Aunt Petunia stiffly said, "You have a phone call from a girl."

Harry nodded and took the phone before he uncertainly said, "Hello?"

The soft soprano of Hermione greeted him on the other line with a rush, "Honestly Harry you never told us that the Dursleys allege you go to, what was it, St. Brutus?"

Harry shrugged to himself before he asked, "Um, I'm guessing that wasn't what you wanted to talk about." Hermione snorted in response and Harry continued, "I'm guessing you got my letter then?"

Harry could feel Hermione roll her eyes all the way in Kensington before she replied, "Of course I received your letter Harry. I was just wondering if you had any preferences."

Harry snorted as he glanced around before he replied, "Hermione you've seen my clothes, do you think I have a preference aside from fitting."

Hermione's scribbling could be heard across the line before she asked, "Would you like a mixture of muggle and magical clothes Harry?"

Harry hummed the affirmative before he replied, "I need enough clothes for say three weeks of classes both magical and muggle. When I see you at the burrow I'll pay you then."

Hermione shifted gears and softly commented, "It really is nice to hear from you this summer. Maybe you could come visit me before the end of the summer?"

Harry shrugged and replied, "I reckon your parents would need to talk to the Dursleys about that. Merlin knows the house would fall to pieces without me."

Hermione giggled, which was a lovely sound, before she replied, "Oh Harry, I'm sure they make do without you during the school year."

Harry grumbled, "Oh great ruin my delusions why don't you."

Hermione laughed and replied, "Ok Harry I need to go, but I'll ask my mum and dad if you can maybe visit a weekend around your birthday."

Harry smiled and said, "That sounds great Hermione. Um, just send Hedwig back when you're done with her. She rather enjoys flying around compared to being locked in her cage all summer."

Hermione softly replied, "Ok Harry, it was nice talking to you."

Harry smiled and said, "Bye."

Harry heard her soft, "Bye" as he hung the phone up and headed up to the bathroom to wash up before he had to help make dinner for Vernon and Dudders once again. Once Harry had finished cleaning up he walked into the kitchen where his Aunt Petunia was watching him in a curious way. She finally managed to croak, "Was that girl full of that freakish business?"

Harry smiled slightly and replied, "She's a muggleborn witch like my mum was, and the brightest witch of her age to boot. She asked if I could visit later this summer around my birthday."

Petunia appeared to be fighting a battle with herself before she asked, "Is she your girlfriend?"

Harry frowned and replied, "No, she is my best friend though. I don't think I'm ready to have a girlfriend yet." Harry smiled sweetly and asked, "How about Dudley, does he have a girlfriend yet?"

Petunia shook her head and replied, "No he doesn't, but his doctor *is* forcing him on a diet starting tonight. So we'll be making a salad with no cheese, and only juice to drink with it."

Harry shrugged and pulled the salad tongs out of the drawer nearest to the sink and began to toss the concoction Petunia had put together. Harry could only wryly think that this would be the first time in his memory that he would get his fair share of a meal.

Meanwhile in Kensington, Hermione Granger was being interrogated by her mother who had overheard her daughter's half of the conversation with Harry on the phone.

"Hermione Jane, I really would like to get to know your friend Harry; but, only if you come clean with me first sweetheart. How do you feel about Harry?"

Hermione blushed slightly as she looked down at her feet before she murmured, "Harry's my best friend and I like him a lot."

Bianca Granger looked a lot like her daughter with curly chocolate brown hair that had tamed with age, and she smiled tenderly at her daughter before she cupped her daughter's chin and tilted her face up until their eyes locked and she said, "So, you're hoping if Harry and you get some time alone he might realize if he has any feelings for you?"

Hermione nodded but added, "Even if Harry isn't looking for a girlfriend right now, I'd still like to do something nice for his birthday."

Bianca smiled and said, "Once your father gets home will discuss it and see if we can invite Harry over for a week around his birthday. If I remember correctly it was July thirty-first." Hermione nodded and her mother continued, "I'm sure we can manage something in time for that. Now, what is this about clothes shopping for Harry?"

Meanwhile back in Little Whinging Dudley and Vernon Dursley stormed through the front door of Number 4 Privet Drive with their thoughts on steak and other succulent delights that the freak and Petunia had made for them.

Vernon and Dudley sat heavily into their seats and Harry could hear the poor wooden chairs creak from the strain. When Petunia brought the salad into the dining room Vernon's moustache began twitching before he asked, "Petunia darling where is the rest of the food?"

Petunia stiffly replied, "I received a call from Dudders's doctor today and he recommended a diet to lower his cholesterol levels. I figured we could diet together as a family to show our support."

Vernon's moustache twitched a few more times before he glanced over at his large son and he nodded before he fake cheerfully said, "Of course anything for our Dudders. We'll have the girls banging down the front door to get to you soon enough."

At the mention of girls Petunia glanced over to Harry before she said, "Harry received a phone call from a girl today. Harry indicated they might invite him over for a week later this summer."

Vernon grunted as he sniffed his salad as Dudley cackled before he said, "A girl called Harry eh, she must really be an ugly cow then."

Harry's eyes narrowed and he replied, "Hermione is actually quite pretty, but she's only my best friend. Unlike you Dudley I *could* have a girlfriend if I wanted one."

Dudley pouted before Vernon merely pointed to the stairs and Harry's room. With a smirk Harry speared one last Roma tomato from his salad and popped it into his mouth before he strutted up the stairs suddenly feeling much better about things.

Harry went to sleep later that night and was drifting into an interesting dream with said best friend when his body stiffened as his dream shifted to something far more sinister. Harry felt like he was slithering on the ground as a snake when he stopped outside of the window of a house and overheard, "This weather is murder on my knee. I swear one of these days I am going to retire to the Caribbean." The old man looked at a picture over his mantle before he sadly muttered, "Oh Frank Bryce you old fool what have you done to yourself." Catching a reflection on the frame of the picture he hobbled over to his window only to see a light on in the house he was a caretaker at.

Frank's eyes narrowed before he darkly muttered, "Damn teenagers making googly eyes again. Well we'll see about that."

Harry followed at a distance as he slithered behind old Frank as he marched up a slope to an old manor of some sort. Frank pulled on the door only to find it still locked. With a baffled expression he pulled a key from his pocket and pulled the door open before storming in not bothering to shut the door behind him. Harry slithered in behind Frank and followed at a distance in the dark and very old building. Frank was hobbling up the stairs towards the only room with a light on in it. As Frank closed in on the room he glanced in as two older men appeared to be having a conversation with an unseen third man in a chair faced away from the door.

With a start Harry slithered into view of the room and recognized one of the men as Wormtail, the rat responsible for Sirius' time in jail and his parent's deaths. The other man appeared to be a little bit younger but not much as he had a thin moustache and slicked black hair. Harry slithered past the caretaker and entered the room before approaching the chair to reveal the very same face Harry had seen one other time, on the back of Professor Quirrel's head. But this time the face was on an infant's body with beady red eyes. Voldemort shrilly said, "It appears Nagini has followed the old muggle caretaker into the house. Wormtail turn my chair so I can properly greet my guest." Voldemort sneered as he uttered, "*Avada Kedavra.*"

The door swung open as Harry watched a green light flash into the hallway followed by the dull thump of a falling body. Harry slithered back into the hallway before Voldemort's voice called out, "No my pet, leave his body. If he comes up missing, the muggles will search here for a body. Wormtail, take the muggle back to his shack and leave him in a chair."

Harry jolted awake as his scar throbbed painfully reminding him terribly of the sinus headaches he had when he was much younger and in a cupboard for his whimpering. Touching his scar gingerly Harry pondered his dream for a moment before writing down everything he remembered. Just as Harry sat his quill down a tapping at the window brought him over to find a tropical bird of some sort carrying a letter from someone.

Harry frowned as he took the letter and gave the bird one of Hedwig's treats which it promptly spit out before once again taking flight. Harry untied the parchment and read:

Hey Kiddo,

As you can tell by the messenger I am somewhere where the sun shines every day. Bucky sends his greetings also. I wish I could be there with you, but remember that I am always with you in spirit if nothing else. I have contacted Dumbledore and he assures me he is working on a way to keep me closer to you. If you ever need anything, or just someone to talk to please write me Harry. I don't know how you feel about Hermione or any other girls for that matter but you'd be surprised how much experience I have with girls. I know you are getting to that age where the opposite sex becomes really interesting so please, if you need some advice write. I care about you kiddo and I don't want to see you hurt.

Love,

Sirius

Harry sat down heavily in his bed feeling happy at Sirius' letter but dread from the events he saw in his dream. Harry pulled out his Divination text book and checked on various kinds of dreams. Unsurprisingly Harry realized his dream wasn't really a dream at all. In fact, Harry thought there was no way it wasn't linked to his scar. Looking longingly at his pillow but realizing there was no way he could sleep the rest of the night, Harry waited for Hedwig to return from her Nocturnal hunting so that he could write a letter to Hermione and see if she could find some of the answers he was desperately seeking.

A/N: This is a new story, with a different bend than Canon. I don't think it will be terribly AU or that the characters will be terribly OOC. Things will obviously change and Harry will be a bit stouter and more assured. His relationship with Hermione will help a lot with that, but like I said we won't actually have a full blown H/Hr ship until the end of fourth year or the beginning of fifth year.

I will be taking this all of the way to the end along with my other two series. Three different plots going at once should keep my plenty busy writing for the foreseeable future in my spare time.

On a final note I promised I would inform all of you of a new Harry Potter fanfiction and just plain fanfiction site at You'll find some familiar names there and an interesting take on the fanfiction experience. I hope you all check it out and enjoy. Thanks to all of you that are reading and please review!!

Chapter 2

Hermione Granger was frantically searching through every book she had on Divination, despite the fact that she no longer took the class. Of course, if one was to ask Hermione, she would claim creative differences between herself and the crack pot Professor of the class.

Finding absolutely nothing that would suggest otherwise and some creative searching of newspapers, Hermione found that Harry had not been divining the event; he had been in fact a first hand spectator of the event somehow. What that meant to Hermione, was that Lord Voldemort was close to fully returning to his former self. Hermione also took the time to glance through a few dark arts texts that she purchased the prior year in an attempt to find a weakness of dementors. In one such book the mention of a dark creation known as a Horcrux would be skimmed over in search of a more obvious answer. Little did she know how much the omission would matter in a couple of year's time.

Hermione's room had become, for her, a rare mess of scattered parchment and books until she finally came upon a mention of indirect possession of another's dream. Hermione frowned in thought before she made a note to further research potential explanations when she returned to Hogwarts the coming year.

Her mother yelled from the kitchen, "Hermione dear, we need to make our final plans before your father has to call the Dursleys."

Hermione quickly tidied up making sure to mark her spots in her notes and books before she ran down the stairs of her house and slid into the kitchen where her mother was finishing up cooking dinner while her father was in his study doing paperwork for their dental practice. Bianca eye her daughter speculatively for a moment before she asked, "So sweetheart you wanted to pick Harry up on the Sunday before his birthday and drop him back off the following Sunday."

Hermione sat down on one of the barstools by the counter before she replied, "Yes mum, I think that would be for the best. That way at

least we break up his summer with the Dursleys before we go to the Quidditch Cup.”

Bianca nodded before she crinkled her nose and asked, “Oh that’s right, Quidditch. Isn’t that the sport you cursed over and over because of Harry’s fall from his broom?”

Hermione bit her lip before she nodded in response and added, “I was never so scared for anyone before mum. I thought Harry was going to die until the headmaster cast the spell to slow him down.”

Bianca walked over and gave her daughter a hug before she pulled away and said, “But he is alright now, isn’t he love?”

Hermione took a deep breath to compose herself before she smiled slightly and replied, “Yes he is.” Hermione brightened and squealed, “Oh I’m so excited mum. I’ve never had any friends visit before, and Harry he means so much to me.”

Bianca smiled before she yelled out, “Michael dear, dinner is ready and we need to discuss Harry’s visit.”

Michael Granger opened the door to the study with a perpetual smile on his face, because his baby girl was home to be doted upon. Michael was a tall and slender man who passed one indelible trait to his daughter, his warm brown eyes. He walked over and hugged Hermione before he sat in the stool next to her and asked, “So when do you want Harry to visit sweetheart?”

Hermione, who was in full blown Daddy’s princess mode replied, “I was thinking we could pick him up on the Sunday before his birthday and then drop him off a week later.”

Michael smiled and nodded before he replied, “As long as you promise to keep Harry busy during the week while your mum and I are in the office, then that should be fine sweets.” Hermione smiled sweetly as her father walked over to the phone to call the Dursleys and finalize the plans to have Harry over.

In Little Whinging the phone rang twice before Vernon Dursley answered, “Hello?”

Michael smiled and asked, "Hello is either Mr. or Mrs. Dursley available?"

Vernon replied, "This is Mr. Dursley."

Michael nodded and said, "Mr. Dursley, this is Michael Granger. My daughter Hermione is a good friend of young Harry. I was calling to infer if Harry could come over to visit for a week at the end of July and the beginning of August."

Vernon grumbled for a moment before he bellowed, "Petunia, could you come here for a moment?"

Michael strained to hear the mumbled conversation about a head freak and acceptable amount of time to stay. After a moment Vernon came back on the line and said, "That should be just fine. When should we expect you on that Sunday?"

Michael frowned in thought for a moment as he glanced at the calendar which read July 11th, "We should be there around 9 am. We'll be in a Rolls Royce."

Vernon swallowed thickly and replied, "I'll inform the fre-Harry to be ready when you stop by. Was that all you wished to know?"

Michael smiled and winked to his wife and daughter before he said, "Yes that would be all Mr. Dursley. Good evening to you."

Vernon muttered, "Oh yes quite, good evening to you as well."

Michael hung up the phone before he looked expectantly at Hermione who almost had a disbelieving expression on her face, "Dad, you're going to drive the Phantom to pick Harry up?"

Michael smiled and replied, "Come now princess, every letter for the last 3 years has had some mention of Harry Potter in it. Surely, you would expect me to make a grand impression for the young man that has captured my little princess' attention like he has."

Hermione blushed furiously, but she managed to mutter in response, "Thanks daddy."

For Harry the two weeks flew by as he worked into a comfortable routine of doing chores, running, and doing a spot of homework before going to bed and starting the cycle anew in the morning. Finally, Harry awoke the morning of the 27th excited to spend a week with Hermione and her parents. Granted Harry had only met the Grangers once in passing before his second year, but he figured anyone who could raise someone as brilliant as Hermione were brilliant in their own right.

Harry threw all of his belongings into his trunk having already sent Hedwig ahead to stretch her wings out. As Harry dragged his trunk down the stairs a quick glance at his old and tattered watch revealed five minutes until the Grangers were due to arrive.

Harry took a quick look around and found no one else awake although Vernon had kindly left a letter:

Boy,

I don't expect to see you again until next Sunday, so best not get into any trouble for your freakishness.

Vernon

Harry balled the note up and threw it away as he wryly said, "Charming Uncle Vernon." Harry dragged his trunk outside the front door where he sat down in the lawn and leaned against his trunk waiting for the Grangers.

At a minute to nine a Rolls Royce literally rolled up in front of number 4. The back door to the car was opened and a brown blur shot towards Harry as he got to his feet. Hermione enveloped Harry into a tight hug before she gave him a kiss on the cheek. Harry colored slightly and understatedly said, "Well, that was a brilliant hello."

Hermione laughed before she asked, "Are you all ready to go Harry?"

Harry nodded as he dragged his trunk across the Dursley's lawn and slid it into the back as Hermione held it open. Harry crawled into the back seat of the car sitting next to Hermione as her mother swiveled around for introductions.

Hermione nodded to her mother a silent conversation taking place before she said, "Harry, this is my mum Bianca and our valet for the day is my dad Michael."

Harry leaned forward and offered his hand shaking Bianca's and followed by shaking the just turned around Michael's hand a moment later. He smiled and earnestly said, "Um, I just wanted to say thanks for doing so much for me this summer."

Bianca smiled and replied, "Oh your welcome, but most of the credit goes to our Hermione."

Harry wrapped his arm around Hermione's shoulder and gave it a squeeze before he softly said, "Thanks Hermione, you're too good to me."

Hermione blushed faintly as her parents turned back around as they took off back towards Kensington and the Granger's residence.

Harry watched out the window just enjoying being in the presence of people who didn't view him as a freak or a celebrity. With that in mind he turned to Hermione who hadn't made a move to disentangle his arm from around her shoulders. He smiled when he realized she had fallen asleep so he gently roused her.

Hermione blinked owlshly for a moment before she smiled tenderly and said, "Hey Harry."

Harry chuckled and replied cheekily, "Hello Hermione, fancy seeing you here."

Hermione smiled and Harry continued teasingly, "So what grand plans do we have for the week Ms. Granger?"

Hermione yawned as she stretched slightly before she replied, "Well, mum and dad still have to work during the week so I'll show you around the town. Of course I'll take you on a tour of Kensington palace and Kensington gardens. Other than that we can just hang out, watch some movies, and talk about school, whatever you'd like."

Harry nodded and said, "That sounds lovely." He looked towards Hermione's parents and whispered into Hermione's ear, "No crazed killers, giant snakes, or demented house elves."

Hermione rolled her eyes playfully in response and swatted Harry's arm as they merged onto the expressway leading to Kensington. Harry cleared his throat and asked Bianca, "Mrs. Granger, Hermione's told me that you and Mr. Granger are dentists."

Bianca nodded and replied, "Yes we are Harry."

Harry nodded and then asked, "Do you specialize in anything?"

Bianca smiled and replied, "I'm an oral surgeon and Michael is a D.D.S, so we cover everything from braces to teeth cleanings."

Hermione chimed in, "Mum and Dad have actually done work for the Prime Minister in the past. Of course, back then he wasn't the Prime Minister but that doesn't really matter much."

Hermione furrowed her brow in thought and asked, "Harry, I didn't even notice in all of the excitement, but where is Hedwig?"

Harry smiled slightly and replied, "I sent her off ahead last night seeing as how she knows the way so well after the last few weeks."

Hermione nodded before she asked, "Are you excited about the Quidditch World Cup?"

Harry shrugged, which surprised Hermione greatly, before he said, "I think it will be a lot of fun, but I'm not nuts about Quidditch like Ron is. I just love to play it is all."

Hermione eyed Harry speculatively for a moment before she remarked, "You seem different somehow Harry."

Harry shrugged and replied, "Everyone changes over time."

Hermione crinkled up her nose at the response but nodded before she asked, "I always thought you loved listening to Ron go on about the Canons."

Harry smiled teasingly and replied, "Well, as brilliant as you are Hermione, even you can be wrong."

Hermione huffed playfully before she swatted at Harry's arm again and honestly said, "I'm so glad you're here Harry."

Harry smiled as he gave her a comforting squeeze before he said, "I'm glad I'm here with you too." Neither noticed the knowing looks passing between the adults sitting up in the front seat, as they were too caught up in their playful banter.

Upon finally reaching the Granger's household which was just outside of Kensington in an affluent looking community. The Granger's house was a sensible gray colored large two storied house. Harry got out of the Rolls after Michael parked the car in the garage adjoining the house.

Hermione helped Harry get his trunk inside the house as she talked about the potions essay they had been assigned by Snape over the summer. Upon reaching the house Bianca said, "Hermione why don't you show Harry to his room and give him a tour of the house. Your father and I will order some pizza for dinner tonight to celebrate Harry being here."

Hermione nodded as she helped Harry drag his trunk up the stairs before taking a left and stopping at the end of the hallway. Harry glanced in and saw a room with a pink comforter and book case before he unenthusiastically said, "Oh um great I love pink."

Hermione rolled her eyes and pointed over Harry's shoulder at a closed door across the hall before she said, "Harry that's my room with the pink. Your room is just inside that door."

Harry released a sigh of relief before he smiled sheepishly as Hermione stepped around him and opened the door to reveal a similar room but with blues and a lack of books welcoming him. He turned to Hermione with a silent question and she appeared very sad for a moment before she replied, "This room was supposed to be for my twin brother when my parents bought the house. But, he was a stillborn and my mum had complications from it so they stopped trying to have more kids."

Harry pulled Hermione into a hug, as a couple of tears reached his shoulder before he pulled away with a tender smile and said, "It's ok, you don't have to say any more, I understand completely."

Hermione smiled wanly and quietly said, "Thanks Harry." She glanced around and said, "Your clothes are in the wardrobe. I figured we could make a day trip to Diagon Alley and do some school shopping sometime before your birthday. I'll let you get settled in, when you're all done just come across the hall and grab me for the rest of your tour."

The first couple of days at the Grangers Harry and Hermione merely spent a lot of time talking and getting to know each other better. Hermione shared her fears about Harry's dream to which he merely nodded as though he had expected or concluded as much as well.

Tuesday night found Harry and Hermione in the den watching a movie when she asked, "Harry, am I your best friend?"

Harry looked at Hermione for a long moment searching for something in her eyes before he replied, "Yes, you're my best friend in the world. Why do you ask?"

Hermione frowned skeptically and asked, "So you're saying Ron isn't your best friend?"

Harry's brow furrowed as he pieced together what the conversation could be about before he replied, "I like to think about the difference between you and Ron is in how we treat each other." Hermione arched her eyebrow but didn't say anything aside from waving her hand in a plea to continue, "Ron, he's my best mate. We talk about guy things, although he mostly wants to discuss Quidditch. Although I had to go to Fred and George when I wanted to know about the feelings I had for Cho Chang last year."

A shadow flickered across Hermione's eyes, which Harry noticed but didn't comment upon as he continued, "They sorted me out on that instead of Ron. I mean fancy asking Ron about girls. Either he'd laugh at me or call me a nutter." Harry ran a hand through his hair and turning his eyes directly towards Hermione he said, "It's like comparing an apple to an orange. Hermione, you are the one person

I can count on, not Ron. I can talk to you about life, my parents, and even school. Hermione I don't know how to describe it any better than to say, I need you more than I need Ron."

Hermione blushed as a pleased smile lit up her face and she said, "I understand Harry, and I feel the same way about you."

Harry nodded when Hermione caught him slightly off guard as she asked, "Harry, how do you feel about Cho?"

Harry swallowed thickly and replied, "I feel the same way about her as I did last year. It's how I feel around most pretty girls, nervous and afraid."

Hermione raised an amused eyebrow and asked, "Most?"

Harry smiled and said, "Oh well, I don't feel like that around you."

Hermione frowned and asked, "So you think I'm ugly?"

Harry's face became slightly panicked before he said, "N-no Hermione, I don't think you're ugly at all. I think you are erm really fetching, honest."

Hermione's face relaxed some, but in a way only a girl could, she tested him, "I appreciate that Harry, but with bushy hair and buck teeth I can assure I'm not pretty."

Harry shook his head vehemently and desperately replied, "Your hair is wicked Hermione honest, and your teeth...your teeth aren't that bad."

Hermione sniffed once before she smiled and asked, "Y-you think my hair is wicked?"

Harry let out a breath and said, "Hermione, look at my hair. I think I have a special appreciation for someone with wicked hair."

Hermione beamed Harry a smile before she gave him a kiss on the cheek and said, "Oh Harry, that's so sweet of you."

Harry gave her a relieved smile, although he was blushing furiously from being kissed, and said, "I'm just being honest." Eager to change the subject Harry asked, "So tomorrow, how are we getting to Diagon Alley?"

Hermione gave Harry a look indicating that she knew what he was doing but also that she was allowing it. so she replied, "The same way you took to the leaky cauldron last year, the Knight Bus."

Harry poked Hermione on the arm and teased, "I don't know by the way you were screaming on Buckbeak's back; I'm fairly sure you won't find the Knight bus any better."

Hermione huffed in response but couldn't keep the amused smile from covering her face as she erupted into a fit of giggles. Harry shook his head at Hermione before he turned his attention back to the movie in an attempt to ignore the giggling girl sitting next to him on the couch.

As Hermione had said the previous night, the pair was outside of the Granger's residence with their wands extended looking for all of the world like a couple of lunatics. Thanks to the enchantment on the bus, as it stopped to pick up the two teenagers, anyone who might have noticed the pair waiting on the side of the road with sticks in their hands immediately forgot what they had been watching and had an odd compulsion to go do some housework.

Upon boarding the bus Harry paid for both fares with the little bit of spending cash he had remaining from the previous summer's excursion to Diagon Alley. As Harry sat down on a bed near the front of the bus he pulled Hermione down as well and said, "Trust me, grab on to the bed nice and tight."

Hermione did as directed and was very glad she had listened when the bus lurched forward at an ungodly speed taking off towards downtown London and the Leaky Cauldron. At one stop in particular Hermione was sent sprawling into Harry, which she quickly separated from blushing furiously even though Hermione's mind was, if anything, encouraged by Harry's reaction.

Upon reaching the Leaky Cauldron, Harry, Hermione, and a few other witches and wizards making the morning commute to work. Upon entering the Leaky Cauldron Tom merely nodded to Harry, recognizing him through his minimal disguise of a baseball cap covering his scar and hair. Hermione pulled her wand and tapped on the necessary bricks as the wall opened revealing Diagon Alley in all of its summer glory.

Hermione immediately grabbed Harry's hand and began to drag him towards Gringott's so he could make a withdrawal to pay for his supplies and clothes. Hermione hadn't brought any money herself, as she was content to spend the money from Harry to get her own supplies.

Upon entering Gringott's Harry walked up to the nearest available teller and said, "Harry Potter here to make a withdrawal from vault 687 please."

The goblin merely nodded and motioned Harry towards the cart that led down into the depths beneath the bank. Hermione grasped Harry's hand as he nodded to indicate it would be a harrowing ride as a non-descript goblin settled into the cart next to them as they took off at breakneck speed. Harry winced as Hermione's nails dug into the skin of his hand, even managing to draw a little blood as the corkscrewed down to the level that held Harry's, Dumbledore's, and even Sirius's vaults. The little cart stopped outside of his vault as the goblin opened the cart's door and turned to Harry before he said, "Key please." Harry handed his key to the goblin, which slid the key into a small opening and turned it as Harry's vault swung open. The goblin was reading a progress report posted by the vault as the two Gryffindors walked inside.

Hermione let out a whistle at the stacks of galleons in Harry's vault before she turned to look at Harry who had a confused look on his face. Harry walked to the entrance of the vault and asked the goblin, "Is there some reason I have so much more money in my vault this year?"

The goblin flipped a couple of pages before he answered, "It appears as though your vault has been filled a day early."

Harry arched his eyebrow and asked, "Meaning what?"

The goblin narrowed his eyes at Harry slightly and replied, "From what I gather on your progress sheets, you have gained limited access to your family vaults upon your 14th birthday. You will gain full access upon your 17th birthday as is the custom in such cases."

Harry sighed as he nodded his thanks and walked back into the vault to a concerned looking Hermione who asked, "Alright there Harry?"

Harry nodded as he grabbed enough money to pay off the Grangers and to get through the school year comfortably. Upon filling his sack he said, "I guess my mum and dad left me more than I thought."

Hermione stepped into the cart and began to lecture, "Harry, the Potter family is a very old and distinguished one. I don't know exactly what your parents did for a living but I assume they could have lived off of the family fortune."

Harry gave Hermione a look that adequately portrayed his reticence about discussing his parents any further for the moment and she understood leaving well enough alone, for the time being. As they reached the lobby Harry grabbed another bag for Hermione's money and carefully counted it out before handing her the bag. As they exited the bank Harry said, "My mum was a researcher for the experimental charms division at the ministry. From what Sirius told me she worked right up until my mum and dad went under the *Fidelus*. My dad worked for the MLE and Sirius suspected he was an unspeakable although my dad could never tell him."

Hermione's already lofty opinion of the stock Harry came from increased as she heard that James and Lily Potter held two of the more distinguished positions to be held within the ministry. Hermione wordlessly led Harry to Madam Malkin's where they were fitted for their robes for the coming year. As they finished Madam Malkin asked, "Would you dears like to be fit for some dress robes too?"

Hermione arched her eyebrow and asked, "Why do we need dress robes?"

Madam Malkin smiled and replied, "I don't know exactly but I received notice that I would need to prepare for a high volume of orders for them. So would you?"

Harry nodded and after a looking over a book of the various selections he picked a plain black set of distinguished robes, which Hermione appreciatively said would look nice on him. Hermione spent a bit longer browsing, and even some additional time trying on various styles before she settled on a set which she refused to show Harry because "it would ruin the surprise."

As Madam Malkin shrunk and packaged their additional clothes, Harry suddenly pieced together that Hermione might fancy him a little based upon her reactions. Deciding to file that highly useful piece of information away until a later date, Harry smiled and asked, "So Flourish and Bott's next?"

Hermione nodded happily as she took Harry's hand and dragged him through the entrance as they browsed for some reading materials for the coming year. While Harry was browsing through some defense texts Hermione went over to the restricted section of the store and inconspicuously searched for a text that could help Harry. She happened upon a book titled, "The Art of Occlumency: The ultimate mental shield."

Hermione slowly returned to the regular section of the store and found a book on Arithmancy just as Harry happened back upon her and with a smile he asked, "Got everything you need?" Hermione smiled sweetly and Harry rephrased, "Right then, have enough to read for the next couple of days?" Hermione rolled her eyes as she punched Harry in the arm before she looped her arms through his and led him towards the clerk in the front to pay for their purchases. Leaving any new books for school to the day before heading back to Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione summoned the Knight Bus again and were whisked back to the Grangers to continue their weeklong visit.

For Harry's birthday he had a small party with the Grangers, and enjoyed a birthday cake of his own for the first time in his life. He received various sweets and cards from Ron, Hagrid, and Sirius. From the elder Grangers Harry received a lovely card and a promise

of an invitation to their vacation abroad the following summer. All in all it was easily the best birthday of his life, and instead of spending it in the insanity of the burrow he curled up on the couch sitting next to Hermione as she forced him to watch the *Star Wars* trilogy.

By the time Harry was back in his room at the Dursleys, he was already counting down the hours until he could leave for the burrow and the Quidditch World Cup.

A/N: Well a week with the Grangers can do wonders for someone it appears. Thanks to all of the great reviewers for the first chapter. I hope this chapter, which was a great diversion from Canon won't lose your interest. I thought it was important to develop a tight H/Hr bond for the year ahead.

Next chapter, we have the Weasleys at the Dursleys, a night at the burrow with Ron, a scene of Hermione and Ginny interaction, and the trip to the Quidditch world cup. Please take the time to review, and thanks for reading.

Chapter 3

Hermione was at the burrow a day before Harry was to arrive because Ginny had written her a few days earlier and wanted some time for girl talk, which Hermione readily agreed to for her own reasons, needing some input on how to deal with Harry. Hermione was well aware that Ginny had suffered from a terrible unrequited crush on Harry for most of her life. Dealing with the situation in a delicate manner was what the details required, and Hermione was determined not to have everything blow up in her face at this point.

It was done innocently enough as they sat on Ginny's bed taking turns painting each other's toe nails and discussing various boys of limited importance. Finally, Hermione's moment came and she hesitantly asked, "Ginny, do you still have a crush on Harry?"

Ginny stopped her toe painting and honestly replied, "I think a part of me will always have a crush on the boy-who-lived and sure I think Harry is cute boy. But, I don't think it'll ever happen for me and I've decided to move on."

Hermione reluctantly asked, "Why don't you think it will happen for you Gin?"

Ginny frowned as she hugged her knees to her chest and replied, "Harry will always see me as Ron's little sister." Ginny's brow furrowed before she asked with a mischievous smile, "The better question is do you have a crush on Harry?"

Hermione blushed at having been found out so easily but she replied, "I didn't tell you but while Harry was visiting we grew a lot closer. We shared a lot of hugs and I gave him a few kisses on the cheek. But, the best part was just how right it felt spending time alone with him without Ron around."

Ginny smiled and she gently placed her hand atop Hermione's and said, "So what you're saying is you don't just have a crush on Harry, you have aspirations for something more with him."

Hermione nodded with a slightly dreamy smile and Ginny simply said, "Well then, I guess we have to go about waking him up."

Hermione's face grew pensive for a moment before she replied, "I don't think that would be a good idea Ginny. Harry he...well he's changed this summer. He pays more attention to the little things and he's just so intense compared to how he used to be. It wouldn't surprise me if he realized I had feelings for him. I wasn't being exactly secretive about it around him. That's part of the reason I am feeling confident, Harry told me he wasn't ready for a girlfriend yet, but short of snogging that's how he treated me over the visit."

Ginny smiled and softly and slightly enviously said, "Girl you've got it bad." Hermione merely smiled and nodded as she stretched her feet back out and Ginny began to finish painting the older witch's toes.

The morning of Harry's sweet reprieve from the Dursleys had finally come and Harry was patiently sitting in the Dursleys den with the entire Dursley family as he read through one of the defense books he had purchased while visiting the Grangers. The Weasleys were supposed to arrive around noon to pick him up forcing Harry downstairs in an attempt to escape the clutches of the Dursleys as soon as possible. The Dursleys were watching a Sunday morning movie on the telly.

Harry's trunk was neatly packed already, as all of his clothes and school supplies still left a large amount of room in his magical trunk. Harry was slightly startled as the fireplace in the Dursleys den flashed with green fire before Mr. Weasley stepped through and clear of the fireplace as the twins followed closely behind. Mr. Weasley immediately spotted Harry who was quietly watching the redheads as the twins inconspicuously dropped a wrapped candy right next to Dudley's seat on the couch. Arthur smiled at Harry and said, "Ah Harry, you're looking well. Although I'm sure Molly will say you're far too thin. I'm guessing by your trunk there you're all packed?"

Harry carefully placed his book back into his trunk and as he stood Dudley grabbed the sweet and swallowed it whole. Dudley's eyes bugged out for a moment before he opened his mouth and his tongue rolled out reaching his bell button before it stopped. Vernon's face

went puce and to the twin's surprise Harry said, "Fred, George I'm sure you guys have some sort of an antidote for this. Give it to Dudley so we can leave."

Fred and George shared an incredulous look before George handed Dudley another sweet which he distrustfully swallowed down as his tongue receded back into his mouth. Vernon eyed Harry strangely for a moment before he grunted in acknowledgement. The twins still sporting incredulous looks on their faces disappeared back into the fireplace as Mr. Weasley handed Harry some floo powder and with a twinkle in his eye said, "Remember Harry, speak your destination clearly. I'll be apparating home with your trunk."

Harry merely nodded as he took a pinch of the FLOO powder and muttered, "The Burrow" as he vanished in a flash of green fire. Arthur turned towards the Dursleys and politely said, "I apologize for my twins, they can be a pair of troublemakers if you don't watch them closely. Can I use your back door?"

Vernon and Petunia hesitated in tandem before nodding as they watched Arthur drag the trunk out the back door before he vanished with a soft pop.

Just from the little practice of watching the Weasleys step out of the FLOO, Harry managed for the first time to FLOO without ending up sprawled out on the floor. The twins were still staring at Harry in confusion before Fred asked, "Harry mate what's with the deal at your relative's house"

George picked up the baton, "We've seen how they treat you and we just thought"

Fred continued, "We would get some pay back on your behalf."

Harry sighed in resignation before he replied, "The thing you guys don't understand is that they take stuff like that out on me when you aren't around."

Fred and George's faces dawned with comprehension before Fred contritely said, "Oh right."

George finished, "Sorry about that mate."

Harry shook his hand dismissively and replied, "Don't worry about it. I dealt with it so it shouldn't be a problem."

Just as Harry finished speaking Mr. Weasley came through the front door with Harry's trunk in hand, soon followed by a thundering of foot steps from the upstairs signaling Ron and the girls realized Harry was there.

Mr. Weasley dragged Harry's trunk over to him and with a slight nod headed into the kitchen to find Molly and perhaps a snack. Ron was first down the stairs and gave Harry a quick one armed hug before he thumped Harry on the shoulder and said, "All right mate, now we can have some fun." Harry nodded and smiled in response as he watched Hermione sprint down the stairs with Ginny in close pursuit.

Both girls crushed Harry into a hug before pulling away with beatific smiles upon their faces, it was one of the things Harry still had a hard time believing after all of his years with the Dursleys. People were actually excited about seeing him, and Harry realized that once again it was a nice feeling.

Hermione was about to say something when Hurricane Molly descended upon them crushing Harry into a hug, Hermione hid her wince when she heard Harry's back crack, before Molly finally pulled away and looked Harry up and down before she said, "Oh Harry dear, you're far too thin." Molly smiled and with a nod said, "Well we'll just have to do something about that, won't we?"

Harry nodded and when Molly turned her back he rolled his eyes and smiled as he began to drag his trunk up the stairs towards Ron's room. Upon reaching the room he glanced around and smiled as the cot had already been set up in its usual spot, and Harry dragged his trunk next to it before he sat down and released a breath he had been holding for a few minutes.

Quickly changing into a nicer set of clothes, Harry stuffed his Dursley throwaways into the bottom of his trunk just as Ron and the girls came in a moment later. Ron and Ginny sat on his bed as Hermione

sat next to Harry on his cot. Ron arched his eyebrow slightly but didn't say anything due to his sister's elbow probing his stomach.

Harry reached over and squeezed Hermione's knee before he asked, "So what's the plan for the Quidditch Cup?"

Ron smiled at his best friend, before he scowled as a thought hit him and he replied, "We have to get up at six tomorrow. Dad told me we had a bit of a hike to reach the portkey that would take us there."

Fortunately of the course of his summer readings Harry had come upon what a portkey was, and he could only hope it was a more enjoyable means of transportation than the FLOO network. Ron continued, "Dad said we were meeting someone he works with at the portkey and his son."

Ginny rolled her eyes and said, "Honestly Ron, the only people around here that it could be are Cedric Diggory and his dad."

Harry brightened a little and chimed in, "Oh that's nice, Cedric is a good bloke."

Everyone settled into a rare silence seemingly with nothing else to say, which spoke volumes on its own. Harry had always been the link holding Hermione and Ron together and for once he was content to see if they could form their own link. After a long silence Harry stood and helped Hermione to her feet before he said, "I want to go for a walk, anyone fancy joining me?"

Hermione merely wrapped her arm around Harry's waist although his eyes never left Ron's before his ginger haired best mate replied, "Yeah that sounds erm nice Harry." Ginny understood that this was one of those circumstances where only the three best friends were allowed and she quietly excused herself back to her own room.

After a long walk in the orchards behind the burrow, which was time spent catching up on the business of the summer, the three friends heard the distant shouts from Molly at the burrow ringing the dinner bell. As they walked back in towards the burrow the awkwardness of earlier had disappeared, Harry and Hermione weren't being as

affectionate as they had been earlier, but that was more a means of making Ron more comfortable than anything else.

As they entered the back door Molly smiled and said, "Ah there you are, go ahead and settle in at the table dears, the food should be ready in a moment." Molly looked at Ron shrewdly before she added, "Ronald, make sure you wash your hands."

Harry and Hermione shared a smile as Ron stomped off grumbling about his mother before they sat down at the table next to each other, more out of routine from years at Hogwarts than anything else. Ron returned still slightly disgruntled and sat down next to Ginny across the table from Harry and Hermione.

It was almost surreal Harry mused, watching the Weasleys interact at the dinner table. There was little verbal communication until everyone had been served and most of that centered around a conversation between Mr. Weasley and Hermione on muggle technology. With a keen eye, Harry observed that the twins and to a lesser extent Ginny were paying close attention to everything Hermione said, but Ron was more concentrated on stuffing his face, which really wasn't all that surprising to Harry in retrospect.

Dinner concluded after Mrs. Weasley served them a chocolate cake for dessert, and Harry enjoyed his one slice and politely begged off from a second piece. While Mrs. Weasley didn't exactly look pleased she acquiesced and said, "I have a week to fatten you up dear."

Harry chuckled and asked, "You don't plan on taking me out back for slaughter do you?"

Mrs. Weasley gave Harry an exasperated look before she said, "You're just too skinny dear."

Harry merely smiled in response as he helped clear the table before following Ron up the stairs to his room while the girls separated and went to Ginny's room. Upon reaching Ron's room Harry changed into his pajamas and sat down in his cot before Ron asked, "Harry, is there something going on between you and Hermione?"

Harry honestly replied, "We've grown closer over the summer Ron, but no we aren't dating or anything." Harry frowned before he asked, "Why do you ask mate?"

Ron shrugged and replied, "You two just seem really touchy feely."

Harry nodded before he seriously said, "I'm not saying Hermione and I won't be dating anytime soon, but at the moment nothing is going on."

Ron accepted this answer before he changed topics and said, "So who do you think is going to win the final? I mean Bulgaria has Krum and he's pretty great, but Ireland has some wicked chasers." The next hour was a one sided conversation about the world cup as Harry occasionally injected a statement but was content at listening to Ron talk as he slowly drifted off to sleep for the early morning to come.

Harry awoke as he was roused by Hermione who had a smile on her face before she whispered, "It's 5:30 Harry, I woke you up so you could still get a warm shower if you wanted one."

Harry rubbed at his eyes but smiled his thanks as he rolled out of his cot before he quietly asked, "What about Ron?"

Hermione giggled and arched her eyebrow before she replied, "You know Ron, he'd rather smell bad then lose any sleep." Harry chuckled quietly and nodded as he grabbed a change of clothes before closing his trunk and heading towards the bathroom.

After a quick albeit warm shower Harry grabbed the spare duffle that Ron had given him the previous night and grabbed a change of clothes, pajamas, and some necessities. Harry also grabbed some extra money in case he wanted to buy something at the World Cup before he roused Ron and said, "Hey mate, if you want to wash up and grab some breakfast before we head it, you better get cracking." Ron grumbled and pulled his pillow over his head. Harry sighed and threw his duffle over his shoulder before walking downstairs to find a moderately light breakfast, for Mrs. Weasley anyways, already sitting on the table as the girls and the twins were having separate conversations.

Harry sat down at the end of the table away from everyone else content to eat a quiet breakfast and mentally prepare himself for the long day ahead. After having a couple of pieces of toast Mr. Weasley walked into the kitchen and asked, "Where is Ronald?"

Harry merely pointed up the stairs and with a smirk said, "I tried to get him up but I guess he felt like having a bit of a lie in."

A moment later Molly bustled from the kitchen and marched up the stairs as a few muffled groans and screams were heard before Molly slammed the door and marched back down the stairs. Ron came down a minute later with his clothes on crooked and the worst case of bed head even Harry and Hermione, with their notoriously untamable, had ever seen. Mr. Weasley gave Mrs. Weasley a pack on the lips before he hefted his duffle and said, "Alright then we're already behind you lot, we best be off if we're going to make our portkey time."

The assembled group piled out of the burrow and Mr. Weasley pointed to a roughly made trail, the sort that had come from years of sporadic use before he said, "If any of you want to go on ahead, just follow the trail until he ends at a large willow tree. That's where we are taking our portkey from."

Harry inhaled a deep breath of the early morning air before he nodded to himself and took off down the trail at a brisk pace. Hermione looked at the rest of the Weasleys who were walking at a more sedate pace and took off behind Harry trying to catch up to share an important conversation.

Hermione caught Harry about two hundred meters down the path and as she was panting she said, "Harry, could you slow up just for second while I catch my breath. I need to talk to you about something important."

Harry stopped and patiently waited until Hermione caught her breath before he grinned and said, "Alright then, best get a move on princess."

Hermione shot him a playfully scathing look as they took off at a brisk pace again. After a few minutes she said, "Harry, I found a book that I think will help with your visions and your scar."

Harry opened his mouth before Hermione cut him off, "Harry I know you're still having visions of some sort, and I know for a fact your scar bothers you from time to time as much as you rub it."

Harry desperately looked like he wanted to refute Hermione's statements but he nodded resignedly and Hermione smiled slightly before she continued, "I found a book on the art of Occlumency. It's the art of magically clouding and closing your mind."

Harry glanced back and the Weasley's were nowhere in sight so he asked, "So you want me to learn it then?"

Hermione nodded as she gently placed her hand on Harry's shoulder stopping him before she said, "I can help you learn Harry. I've been practicing myself the past few weeks, and I can already feel the difference. The problem is that we will be limited by how much progress we can make without a legilimens to test our defenses."

Harry sighed before he nodded and said, "Fine, this will be our little secret when we get back to school. Was there anything else?"

Hermione shook her head and gave Harry a brief hug before she pulled away and said, "I swear Harry, this is going to help you so much."

Harry merely smiled and motioned with his hand at the trail as Hermione nodded and they began to hike in earnest once again. Nearly a half an hour later they reached the willow at the end of the trail, with the only thing out of place being an old decrepit boot.

Harry turned to Hermione and with a smile said, "Lets have a bit of a sit down, and the rest of the red headed army should be along in about a half an hour."

They sat down with their backs against the trunk of the willow in silence for a few companionable minutes before Hermione asked,

“Harry, do you ever make goals for yourself before the beginning of a school year?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair mussing it further before he honestly replied, “I used to think so, but now after this summer I don’t know.”

Hermione nodded thoughtfully before she asked, “Do you have a goal for this year at school Harry?”

Harry sighed before he picked up a rock and replied, “Ever since I heard my dad was an animagus, I wanted to see if I could have a form too. It’s stupid I know but-.”

Hermione cut him off, “Harry, it’s not stupid at all.” Giving Harry one of those patient I know something you don’t smiles, which Hermione was famous for, she said, “I was actually expecting this at the end of the last school year Harry.”

Harry frowned and asked, “What?”

Hermione rolled her eyes and replied, “Harry I was all prepared to make the potion and everything for you, on the condition that you do the transformation under my supervision. Of course I wanted to find if I had a form also, and I figured we’d ask Ron if he wanted to also.”

Harry smiled as Hermione prattled on about proper protocol for animagus transformations before he asked, “D-do you think we could maybe do it this year?”

Hermione smiled and replied, “I have all of the ingredients in my potion stores.” Then she frowned and added, “Unfortunately, my quintaped hair stores are too low to do the potion for more than two people. I had to make an altered form of a pepper up potion to keep me going at the end of the year and it required quintaped hairs.”

Harry nodded and asked, “Hermione, when can you have the potion completed by?”

Hermione bit her lip for a moment before she replied, "Probably by the end of September if I get started as soon as we get back to school."

Harry nodded and asked, "So do you think maybe just you and I can, you know?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Of course Harry, but remember you have to listen to what I say and follow the protocol."

Harry nodded before he reached over and squeezed Hermione's hand before he earnestly asked, "What about you Hermione, what's your biggest goal for the year?"

Hermione blushed lightly and murmured, "House elves."

Harry frowned in thought for a moment before he asked, "What about house elves?"

Hermione exhaled a breath and said, "House elves as a race are enslaved by wizards and slavery is wrong Harry. Once you told me that you had freed Dobby, I knew I had to find a way to free all of the other elves."

Harry reached over and patted Hermione's hand before he said, "I'll help you Hermione, just say the word."

Harry was startled when Hermione tackled him and squeezed him tightly before she released her grip and murmured into his chest, "Oh thank you Harry, I was certain I'd have to nag you and Ron to help."

Harry smiled as he gently pushed her to arms length before he said, "But, like my goal you have to be willing to listen to my ideas, ok?" Hermione nodded happily as a rustling in the trees was heard off to the right of the trail before Cedric and his father emerged from the trees.

Harry and Hermione stood up and held their duffles of to their sides before they waved to two wizards over to the tree. Cedric eyed the pair uncomprehendingly for a moment before his eyes lit up and he said, "Hey Harry, erm Hermione right?" Hermione nodded and Cedric

turned to his father and said, "Dad this is Harry Potter and Hermione Granger."

Amos Diggory had sandy colored hair like his son with kind eyes and mottled beard on his face, "He patted Cedric on the back and said, "Harry Potter you say, why wasn't Cedric the one to hand you your first loss in Quidditch Potter?"

Harry was startled by the tactless statement and replied, "Um, I was attacked by dementors sir. Not to take anything away from Cedric that is."

Amos smiled and said, "Of course lad, I'm just proud of my boy, you understand."

Harry nodded and was about to reply when the Weasleys moved into the clearing by the tree and staggered towards the boot by the tree. Mr. Weasley smiled as he saw Amos Diggory and said, "Ah Amos good chap, you must have just beaten us. Although I'm guessing Harry and Hermione here have been waiting for awhile." Hermione merely nodded to confirm Arthur's suspicions as they all unconsciously formed a circle around the boot.

Mr. Weasley smiled and said, "Alright everyone we should have about a minute until the portkey activates. Just grab a good hold of the boot and let go when I tell you to." Everyone grabbed a piece of the musty old boot as they nervously waited for the portkey to activate. Only Arthur, Cedric, and Amos had actually used a portkey before so there was an anxiety about the entire experience.

Harry took a glance around at everyone's faces and saw the relaxed expression on the three older of their group before he turned to Hermione and murmured, "Just follow Mr. Weasley's lead on this Hermione. I have a feeling this is going to be a ri-."

Harry never finished his comment as the portkey activated tugging at each of their navels before sucking them into a vortex of wind and color. Harry had no real point of reference as Mr. Weasley yelled at them to release the boot and then did so in kind. But, if Harry had to hazard a guess he assumed it was what getting sucked into a tornado felt like. Harry caught Hermione's attention and pointed out

Mr. Weasley as the older wizard kicked his legs to take an upright position which they both copied. A large field suddenly appeared rapidly beneath their feet and Harry and Hermione joined the other portkey veterans in landing softly in their feet.

Harry chuckled as he saw the Weasley children in a large pile just off to his right and couldn't help but offering a hand to his less observant friends. After everyone had regained their upright posture Mr. Weasley said, "Ok Amos, I'll see you in the office next week." Cedric and his father disappeared over a hill as the eldest Weasley turned to the assembled group and said, "Ok everyone over the hill to the camp site. We've rented out two plots and I had to borrow a couple of tents to fit everyone. Ginny and Hermione you get a tent to yourselves while the rest of us sad males get to share a larger tent."

The group followed Mr. Weasley over the hill to a very bizarre sight, a wizard was sitting in a chair next to an older man who appeared to be a muggle, occasionally hitting him with a spell. Mr. Weasley walked up to the man and said, "Ah hello there, I've got two plots rented out to the name Weasley."

The muggle blinked once before he said, "Ah that'll be forty pounds guvnah."

The wizard flicked his wand and the muggle's eyes went unfocused before he turned to Arthur and said, "That'll be five Galleons Mr. Weasley." Arthur ponied up the necessary cash and smiled as the wizard waved them through as the muggle's eyes slowly began to refocus.

Once they had cleared the gate a large campsite faded into existence, Harry took one look at the site before him and with a smile towards Hermione said, "I love magic."

A/N: There it is, another chapter by the wayside. Next chapter, we have the Quidditch cup and its aftermath. I want to thank all of my reviewers for the overwhelming response thus far, and to encourage all of you to keep up the great work. Next chapter will be out probably by Wednesday as I have a chapter of Maturation to write and other papers needing my attention. Thanks for the reviews and keep reading!!

Chapter 4

As the assembled group walked down into the camp, the huge stadium erected for the match came into view in the distance. Even the magnificent sight of Hogwarts for the first time didn't have the same kind of shock value as seeing the massive stadium. Seeing Hogwarts for the first time was more of a life defining moment, while the stadium was the same sort of awe one experiences when placed in a position to define just how small and insignificant human beings are.

As they walked through the large camp Harry laughed as he watched various witches and wizards shoot off magical fireworks and play games. One game in particular caught his attention as two wizards were playing catch with a quaffle, but instead of throwing it they were waving their wands. Harry frowned in thought before he poked Hermione in the arm and distracted her from watching a couple snog like there was no tomorrow. She shook her head and turned to Harry with a question in her eyes before he asked, "What spell are they using over there?"

Hermione looked to where Harry was pointing before she replied, "Oh a summoning charm of some sort I'd guess."

Harry merely nodded as he glanced over at what Hermione had been watching and teasingly said, "Oh so that's what you were watching."

Harry chuckled and said, "Oy Ron, guess what Hermione was perving at?"

Ron smiled and said, "Hermione perving, oh I have to hear this." Ron walked over to his friends and had to stifle a laugh when Harry pointed out the couple still snogging as though their lives depended upon it. After a moment Ron decided it was worth a potential hexing to laugh as he had desperately wanted to, and did so even though he quickly retreated back to the twins to avoid the withering glare Hermione had shot him with.

Finally Mr. Weasley waved the pair over and pointed at a pair of tents the rest of the Weasley brood had entered before he said, "Hermione,

you are in the smaller tent to the left over there. You and Ginny should find rather cozy accommodations. Harry, this is us over here. They may not look like much, but you must remember that magic is a most wonderful thing.”

Harry and Hermione nodded as they entered the canvas entrances and were rather surprised at the spacious rooms found within. After a few minutes of getting settled in Harry went looking for Mr. Weasley to discuss something that had been on his mind for awhile.

Harry found the Weasley patriarch sitting in the den of the tent with the morning edition of the prophet and a steaming hot cup of tea off to his side. Harry sat down across from him and Arthur glanced over the top of the paper before he folded it up and with a kind smile asked, “What can I help you with Harry?”

Harry sighed before he asked, “I was wondering if you could describe the ministry and how it works to me sir?”

Arthur ran a hand through his thinning red hair before he asked, “Why would you like to know Harry?”

Harry frowned and replied, “It never hurts to be informed I guess sir.”

Arthur nodded to himself before he said, “No I guess you are right on that.” Taking a moment to gather his thoughts he said, “The ministry of magic is made up into two main branches: The executive branch, which includes Minister of Magic and several administrative offices; and the legislative branch, which includes the Wizengamot and the eight main departments including the misuse of muggle artifacts department which I head. The executive branch has the power to put into place initiatives, which may only be ended by a majority vote of the Wizengamot. Now the Wizengamot is a rather interesting creature. It is filled by those of great feats of magic or those of great ancestry. I believe the Potter family was represented in the Wizengamot until your grandfather Potter’s death roughly seventeen years ago. Others make the Wizengamot by the awarding of the order of Merlin. Those that have the award bestowed upon them are granted a seat and the family lowest on the list of ancestry loses its seat until the order of Merlin owner passes on. Therefore it is typical to have an entire session of the Wizengamot filled with witches and wizards born one

hundred years before the current generation. So, typically the body is quite conservative which is why wizarding customs are at least fifty years behind those of the muggles.”

Harry nodded before he asked, “What group is responsible for enforcing orders throughout the country?”

Arthur smiled and replied, “I am not aware if you have been told, but your father worked for the department of magical law enforcement. It is divided into three groups: unspeakables who inhabit the department of mysteries, hit wizards who are the ministry’s military force, and the aurors who are the police force of the wizarding populace. I have no doubts that you will see several aurors at the match tonight if you have a keen eye.”

Harry nodded as he assimilated all of Mr. Weasley’s answers to what he already knew before he said, “Thanks Mr. Weasley, I never really had any idea on most of that before now.”

Mr. Weasley merely waved his hand to dismiss the thanks before he smiled and said, “Now, I believe that if you and your friends would like to buy some souvenirs now is the time to do so. You should also explore the camp a little; I assure you it is an experience not to be missed.”

Harry smiled as he stood and gathered Ron up before he went to the girl’s tent and called inside, “Hey Ron and I are coming in.” Hearing no reply they entered to find the girls nowhere in plain sight. Harry frowned for a moment before the two witches came out in slightly less sporty clothing than earlier. Harry sighed before he asked, “Hey you two, want to go grab some souvenirs and a walk around the camp?”

Hermione glanced at Ginny who smiled and nodded before she replied with a smile and long suffering sigh, “Oh if we have to.” Harry and Ron chuckled as they exited the tent, Harry held the flaps open as the girls exited and they were off to the souvenir stands on the other side of the camp.

The entire walk was spent pointing and commenting on something else new and fresh that people in the camp were doing. While Ron and Ginny were well aware of many of the things the magical people

were doing to pass the time, there were still several things that even they had no idea on. Finally they reached the expansive souvenir stand and Harry found something he immediately want to get, a device called omnoculars that could magically record the things viewed through the lens, much like a video camera. Harry looked at the price of thirty galleons which was rather expensive, but considering he had well over five hundred galleons and he wanted to splurge a little on his friends Harry purchased four and handed one to each of his friends.

All of them immediately protested but Harry merely put his hands in his pockets before he said, "Listen, I planned on making up for the lack of birthday presents I've gotten for the two of you. Ginny this is your birthday and Christmas present from me." Harry turned to Ron and Hermione before he said, "Now, those made up for the lack of gifts in the past. I want you two to pick one specific gift that you'd like for putting up with me last year. Cost is of no consequence so just, please?" Harry finished his eyes imploring his friends.

Reluctantly Hermione and Ron nodded and began to pore over the souvenir stand as Ginny was off to the side using her omnoculars to see how they worked. Ron was first back with a nice but not overly expensive pair of dragonhide keeper gloves. He smiled slightly and replied, "The keeper for the Irish swears by this brand." Harry merely nodded and paid the ten galleons for the gloves before handing them back to Ron whose face looked like he had been given the greatest present ever.

Hermione took a bit longer but the smile on her face and her hands behind her back alerted Harry to the fact that she had found exactly what she had been looking for. Hermione winked at Harry before she pulled an exact replica of his Quidditch jersey although in a larger size. Hermione smiled and replied, "I wanted some new pajamas and I found just the thing." Ron looked at Hermione strangely before he shrugged while Harry paid with his eyebrow arched the entire time.

As they began to walk in a circuitous route back to their campsites Harry and Hermione lagged behind the Weasley siblings. With a perplexed but amused grin on his face Harry asked, "How can they sell a jersey with my name on it?"

Hermione fixed him with a look before she sighed and replied, "You know Harry you should really read *Hogwarts a History*." She smiled and said, "The board of governors signed a contract with the international Quidditch Association in 1920. The school's Quidditch pitch and supplies are bought and maintained in return for the licensing rights to all players and teams of the school."

Harry smirked and said, "So does that mean I'm your favorite player?"

Hermione smiled sweetly and replied, "I would think the answer to that was obvious. I mean I even set a professor on fire just to make sure you could win a match."

Harry frowned skeptically and asked, "I thought you did that to save my life."

Hermione shrugged and said, "Well, there was that too." Harry tickled her ribs in response as Hermione squealed before she took off at a run to catch up with Ron and Ginny.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent alternating time between casually reading and playing some chess between all of the occupants of the tent. Once Ron had secured a close victory over his father, the one in the family that passed the chess genes to Ron, Arthur glanced at his watch before he said, "Oh, we should get going in a few minutes. Only bring things you need, but make sure you have your wand just in case."

Harry quickly put on a jacket before he checked the make shift wand holster he had place in all of long sleeved shirts. After nodding to himself Harry walked outside of the tent to find the twins and the girls having an animated discussion. The twins were wearing giant hats with shamrocks plastered all over them; Harry quickly figured the twins were Irish fans like most of those attending. Harry caught the tale end of the conversation as Hermione clucked her tongue before she said, "I still say it's a bad idea betting on the game."

Fred and George merely ignored her as they turned to Harry and George said, "Harry mate, we could use a male's opinion on this."

Fred continued, "We placed a bet with Ludo Bagman on the Irish winning the match tonight."

George jumped in, "But we had Krum catching the snitch also."

Fred juggled back into the conversation, "The problem is the girls don't think it's a good idea to place a bet with money that we don't have."

George ping ponged back, "But, they don't seem to understand that the bets were independent of each other so if we only win one, we still cover our losses."

Harry sighed but nodded despite the disapproving glances from the girls and said, "It makes sense to me, and I have to agree with you on both bets. Especially, after listening to Ron describe it all last night. But I don't think that's why the girls have a problem. I'm pretty sure they disagree because ethically it isn't exactly on the straight and narrow."

Fred and George merely wagged their eyebrows in response indicating that they rarely were on the straight and narrow. Harry laughed in response before Ron and Mr. Weasley exited the tent and distributed the tickets to the ministry box before they headed off towards the stadium for the Quidditch Cup finals.

As the usher in front of the stadium ripped their tickets they entered the stadium although the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood on end as he glanced back at the camp, which looked ominous in the dying sunlight. Harry shrugged as he consciously checked the wand up his sleeve before he followed the Weasleys and Hermione up the stairs towards the ministry box and their seats for the match.

As they passed the last of the luxury boxes Draco, Lucius, and Narcissa Malfoy along with Minister Fudge, Percy and another man came into view beneath them on the stairwell. Draco's eyes immediately lit up with malice and he drawled, "Oh look father, Scarhead, mudblood, and a pack of blood traitors."

Lucius looked up with a snarl as he briefly locked gazes with Harry for the first time since the end of second year before he turned his

attention to Mr. Weasley and silkily said, "Ah Arthur, I see that your family once again is seated up amongst the peasants."

Fudge smiled jovially and said, "Come now Lucius there's no reason to be so obtuse. Arthur and his guests are in the ministry box, which is quite nice from what I hear. Lucius narrowed his eyes at Arthur one last time before he turned and marched into the velvet curtain of the minister's private box followed by Narcissa.

Draco however, wasn't quite finished and said, "I'll get you one of these days Potter."

Harry flatly replied, "Go now, and maybe you can still ride your daddy's coattails like you always do Malfoy." Draco snarled but bit off his reply, and stomped into the minister's private box leaving Fudge, Percy, and the unknown man looking up at the group.

Fudge muttered something to the man before he turned and pointed at Harry before he said, "See there, he is the boy-who-lived." Fudge was speaking very slowly as though he was explaining this to a child. Harry merely sighed and began walking up the stairs leaving the minister of magic and his remaining entourage gaping at the obvious slight.

Upon reaching the ministry box Harry exhaled heavily as he leaned against the rail and took in the sight of nearly the entire stadium from within for the first time. Hermione carefully wedged herself next to Harry and softly asked, "Are you all right? I mean I know it wasn't Malfoy that has you feeling this way."

Harry sighed before he turned to Hermione with a weak smile and said, "No, I guess it just gets old being pointed at because of something I have no memory of." Hermione smiled sympathetically and patted his arm as they watched the pre-game fireworks light up the night sky.

After the fireworks ended a stocky man the twins identified as Ludo Bagman floated to the center of the field on a platform before he magically amplified his voice and said, "Ladies and gentleman welcome to the 130th Quidditch World Cup finals between Ireland and Bulgaria. Please stand as Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge

leads us all in the national song.” After a rousing rendition of the magical Britain’s anthem, Merlin’s wisdom Bagman once again said, “Now would you please welcome the National team from Ireland!!”

The entire crowd watched spellbound as giant image of Leprechaun filled the expanse of the sky above the stadium. The Irish team flew through the image in a flash of light as gold began to rain from the sky and the crowd went crazy. Ron had collecting handfuls of the gold as Harry and Hermione watched him in puzzlement. Ron took a handful and handed it to Harry before he said, “That should cover some of those presents mate.”

Harry sighed as he shook his head before he asked, “Ron, have you read anything about Leprechauns before?” Harry was wincing mentally as he thought about how he had only just recently read the passage about Leprechaun’s gold in his book from Hagrid’s class. With a shrug he continued, “Mate, Leprechaun’s gold isn’t real. It vanishes a little over a day after you get it.”

Ron’s ears were tinged with red before he frowned and muttered, “Must be nice to have enough gold not to worry about that.”

Harry was about to respond when Bagman once again broke over the crowd and said, “Now from Bulgaria and lead by the great magician of the skies Viktor Krum, Bulgaria!!”

Unlike the Irish the Bulgarians darted into the skies above the stadium but everyone’s attention was one the field below as a group entered it. Harry watched with interest at the beautiful creatures began to sensually dance to a silent rhythm. He frowned before he turned to Hermione and asked, “Hermione, what are those things dancing on the field.”

Hermione turned towards Harry with a shocked expression on her face before she said, “Those are veela Harry. How is it that you aren’t affected like the rest of the single men?”

Harry glanced around and his eyes bugged out as Ron and the twins were climbing the railing, perched precariously close to falling down to their deaths. Mr. Weasley had a grasp on their backs and with a curious eye Harry bent over the rail and had to stifle a laugh as he

watched Malfoy doing some strange dance of his own on the rail of the minister's private box. With a chuckle he turned to Hermione once more and replied, "Don't know really, maybe it's because I'm next to the prettiest girl in the stadium."

Hermione blushed furiously before she looked over at Ron and replied, "Well it certainly didn't work for Ronald if that's the case."

Harry smiled as wrapped his arm around Hermione's shoulder before he gave it a squeeze and said, "Maybe he just needs glasses then." He then proceeded to waggle his eyebrows suggestively earning a soft swat to his head.

After the veelas left the field and the males of the stadium collectively blinked as they regained their senses Bagman once again blared, "Now for the ceremonial flipping of the galleon." After the Irish won the quaffle and received the quaffle as per international rules a whistle sounded in the air and the match began.

Harry had pulled his omnoculars out and trained them on Krum as he recorded the best seeker in the world in his element, for future reference. Occasionally Harry would glance around and check the score to see the Irish advantage expand as the chasers dominated.

Finally the lead by the Irish had grown larger than the catch of the snitch and Harry watched fascinated as Krum frowned before he went into a steep dive towards the pitch in pursuit. The Irish seeker gave chase but slammed into the turf as Krum flattened out mere inches from the ground completing the Wronski feint. Harry gaped as he muttered, "Sweet Merlin he pulled off a Wronski feint." A moment later Krum closed his fingers around the snitch ending the match, but not before the Irish had secured a victory and the cup.

The twins crowed as they secured the second part of the bet, effectively making 500 galleons in one fell swoop. Harry smiled before he walked over nudged them and said, "So where do you collect your winnings?" Fred succinctly replied, "Bagman set up a booth outside of the stadium."

George heartily patted his twin's back and added, "Then we can start our joke shop."

Harry's eyes dawned with realization before he half asked, "The Dursleys?"

Fred and George merely smirked in response and Harry muttered, "Of course, testing their products."

As the group exited the stadium Harry once again locked gazes with Draco, but the Slytherin's expression was one of anticipation and glee as opposed to the typical smirk he wore. Harry's sense of disquiet from earlier returned ten-fold and he turned to Ron and Hermione before he said, "Something is going on guys. Make sure you have your wands at the ready." Ron and Hermione nodded as they pulled their wands from their pockets and gripped them tightly in response. Harry quickly fingered the wand up his sleeve as the now wary trio returned to the camp without any incident.

Mr. Weasley was rigging a small fire put in front of their tents to sit around for the rest of the night and spotted the three looking rather anxious so he asked, "You three look like you've been spooked. Is everything all right?"

Harry frowned before he replied, "I don't know sir, I just keep getting this feeling that something is going to happen."

Mr. Weasley was well versed in the history that Harry had in his years at Hogwarts, and to say that Harry was accustomed to similar feelings he didn't dismiss it in the same way Molly would have. He smiled slightly and said, "Why don't you three sit around the fire and I'll go see if anything is happening, ok?"

As they sat around the fire in silence, partly because of the anxiety around the group and partly because of the new dynamic that they hadn't fully adapted to yet; Hermione finally broke the silence as she asked, "Ron, is Percy working for Minister Fudge now?"

Ron blinked for a moment surprised at the break from silence before he replied, "Um, no he is the executive assistant to Barty Crouch."

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly before he asked, "Wasn't he the one who was responsible for Sirius not receiving a trial?"

Ron shrugged but Hermione said, "Well he was the one who advocated the use of unforgivables by aurors in capturing or killing deatheaters. So it wouldn't surprise me if he also refused trials to suspected deatheaters."

Harry frowned in thought for a long moment until an explosion was heard in the distance. Harry glanced towards the explosion and could see smoke billowing from the far end of the camp. He turned to Ron and said, "Mate, get Ginny and the twins. Something is coming this way."

A moment later Mr. Weasley came running back to the camp gasping for air before he manages to say, "Deatheaters, coming this way. Go out into the forest, you should be safe there."

Harry nodded and took the lead as everyone followed him out of the camp and into the forest somehow managing to avoid being trampled in the process. Harry had pulled his wand and instructed everyone else to do the same as a precaution against any further attacks. They reached a clearing in the woods just out of sight of the camp and stopped content that they were far enough away from the camp. Harry caught the occasional flash of green, the same green he remembered from his run ins with the dementors the previous year.

A rustling in the trees to the right broke Harry from his musings and he slowly stalked towards the sound until he heard a deep male voice utter, "*Morsmordre*"

Harry watched a spell erupt from a concealed wand and frowned in thought before he raised his wand and said, "*Stupefy*" as a muffled sound in the leaves happened a moment later. Harry glanced back at Hermione and Ron before he said, "Stay here, I'm going to see who it is I stunned. Hermione nodded reluctantly as Ron had the same look on his face that he had in second year when they had entered Aragog's lair.

As Harry approached the body he heard several voices call out, "*Stupefy*" and ducked five separate stunners sent at him. The wizards approached and Harry recognized two of the men as Amos Diggory and Mr. Weasley.

An older wizard with a stubby moustache and a bowler hat demanded, "Boy, why did you summon the dark mark?"

Mr. Weasley immediately stepped in and said, "Barty this is Harry Potter, surely you can't be insinuating he conjured the mark, he's only a child after all."

Barty sneered and was about to reply when a little elf popped in next to Harry and was wringing her hands in a mannerism very similar to Dobby's when he had done something bad in their second year. Harry glanced at the elf before he said, "I heard a rustle in the woods and I heard someone say the spell Morsmordre I think it was. I hit them with a stunner and they should be right here."

Harry frowned before he bent down to feel the floor and immediately realized that an invisibility cloak was at work. Harry grasped the cloak and tugged it off revealing the same man he had seen in his vision of Voldemort earlier in the year. Amos was first to comment and he asked, "Barty isn't that your son?"

Barty's face had turned puce snarled before he tossed his hat to the elf, who immediately began to wail at being given clothes. Finally, he managed to sputter out, "Why that's preposterous Amos. You know as well as I do that the foul brat died nearly ten years ago."

Mr. Weasley waved his hand at a couple of men who quickly picked up the stunned man and took the wand from his grasp. The man with the wand waved his own wand over it and muttered, "*Prior Incantato*."

Everyone was stunned when the same green snake with a skull wrapped it its grip appeared before the man banished it with a scowl on his face. Amos turned to Harry and said, "Well done Harry, we'll make sure everyone knows of your good deed." He followed the two men who were levitating the unconscious man's body which had now been manacled.

The elf was completely inconsolable as it grasped at the hat her master had given as a punishment. Harry crouched down oblivious to everything else as Hermione and the Weasley siblings finally found the courage to get a full view of the proceedings. Harry gently asked, "What's your name?"

The elf wailed, "I is Winky, and I is being a bad elf."

Harry shook his head before he said, "You're not a bad elf. From what I've gathered your master was Barty Crouch, and I stunned his son because he had just done something terrible."

Winky hiccupped slightly before she said, "But Winky is being a free elf, and she is deserving to be punished."

Harry shook his head before he internally grimaced and said, "Winky, would you like a new master?"

Winky nodded and looked at Harry with hopeful eyes before he said, "Then go to Hogwarts and ask to speak to Headmaster Dumbledore. I'm sure he would be happy to have you serve him and the castle."

Winky startled Harry as she hugged him and said, "Oh thank yous sir, Winky is doing that right away." True to the little elf's words she vanished with a pop and Harry fell backwards onto to his bottom.

A moment later Hermione and Ron helped him to his feet before Hermione swatted him across the head and sternly said, "Don't you ever do something that reckless again." The she enveloped Harry into a hug and squeezed him as tightly as humanly possible.

Hermione pulled away and with a slight smile Harry said, "Well, I told you I had a feeling something was going to happen."

Ron chuckled as Hermione rolled her eyes, but for the first time in the summer the balance that the trio had been sorely lacking had been restored.

A/N: Another chapter in the tank and I hope you all enjoyed the changes to what happened in canon. Without Barty Crouch Jr. around I wonder how much everything will change? Just think about the implications of what that could mean. If any of you have a guess as to what might happen with Moody you're more than free to drop a line in a review.

Thanks for reading, and reviewing.

Chapter 5

Wizarding Britain had once again fallen into calm, following two days of mild hysteria caused by the reemergence of evil in their carefully constructed little world. Of course it would have been much worse if one of their heroes hadn't once again saved the day. Harry Potter had fought back for them once again like they knew he always would. After all, what was the world without heroes?

At the Burrow, Harry and Hermione had been left alone much more frequently than their first day, because it seemed to be almost by unspoken agreement that something was happening between them. Of course, unlike what many hormonal teenagers might have been using the precious commodity of time to do, Harry and Hermione were beginning their Occlumency sessions.

They were sitting in a couple of ratty old chairs in the back of the garden three days following the Quidditch world cup tournament as Hermione softly said, "Ok Harry, now I want you to clear your mind by thinking of the feeling you have when you fly your broom. No Quidditch, no snitch, just you, the wind in your hair, and the smooth wood of your broomstick."

Harry let out a breath and did as Hermione instructed. His mind slowed down until it was just him and that feeling of freedom he always felt in the skies above Hogwarts. Some how he clearly heard Hermione say, "Ok Harry, now that you are in your quiet place, I want you to build a wall around the outside of your quiet place."

Harry's breathing had slowed down considerably as he did as Hermione had instructed. Brick, stone, and mortar went together to build four walls and a ceiling of a room with a door that only Harry knew how to open. Finally Hermione asked, "Harry have you built your walls?" Harry nodded and she continued, "Ok Harry, now open your eyes for me."

Harry opened his eyes blinking owlishly for a moment before he took his glasses and slid them back onto his face. Hermione smiled and softly asked, "Harry, how did you build your wall?"

Harry couldn't remember a time he felt more relaxed as he replied, "I-I built a room instead of a wall. Four walls and a ceiling around my quiet place just like you said."

Hermione's eyebrows arched incredulously before she said, "That's very good Harry. You skipped right to the third step then. It took me a week to build all of my walls. I think we've done well today, but tomorrow we are going to work on strengthening your walls." Hermione's face became slightly concerned before she said, "Harry, when you do something as complicated and sensitive as reorganizing your mind so that you can occlude it, it makes your mind very susceptible to outside attacks. Hopefully Voldemort doesn't plan on doing anything tonight, and by tomorrow you should be able to repel a weak vision at the very least."

Harry nodded as he stood, feeling very refreshed, before he offered his hand to Hermione who gratefully accepted it and stretched her legs as she stood too. With a strange smile she said, "I think I'm going to go for a bit of a walk alone for awhile Harry." Harry smiled and they walked off in opposite directions, one to the burrow and one out into the orchards behind the old house.

Upon entering the Burrow Harry noticed a small piece of paper on the table addressed to himself and Hermione. It read:

Harry and Hermione,

Ronald, Ginevra, the twins, and I have gone to Diagon Alley to do some school shopping. Ron and Ginny found your book lists so we will pick up your books and you can pay me back later tonight. A roast is in the oven and cooking so feel free to relax and make yourselves comfortable.

Molly

Harry grabbed an apple from the table and took a bite from it before he headed towards the den to kip out on the couch for a little while. As he approached the den a voice near the fireplace startled him, until he realized that Mr. Weasley was making a FLOO call with someone.

Curiosity got the best of him and he got close enough to eavesdrop as Mr. Weasley exasperatedly said, "I understand that Amos, but surely you can't believe that Bertha Jorkins missing and this whole Barty Crouch Jr. business are somehow connected. Yes, yes I will help Alastor pack and send his supplies to Hogwarts on the first. I'll talk to you later old friend, Molly and the kids should be back soon. What, oh of course I'll give your thanks to Harry. Yes you too, I'll give Molly your regards Amos."

Harry quickly scampered back to the kitchen and continued his work on the apple he had plucked a few minutes earlier. Mr. Weasley walked out into the kitchen and sat down at the table heavily before he said. "Ah Harry, where's Hermione?"

Harry swallowed his mouthful of apple before he answered, "She's out back for a walk. I'm pretty sure she should be back in a few minutes sir."

Arthur nodded before he said, "I just received a FLOO call from Amos Diggory. He told me to extend his thanks for dispatching of Barty Crouch Jr. a few days ago."

Harry smiled slightly before he asked, "What's going to happen to him Mr. Weasley?"

Mr. Weasley sighed before he said, "Someone had been holding him under the imperius for so long that his mind was too damaged to question him using typical means. So it was impossible to determine who had freed him. Many in the ministry suspect Barty Crouch Sr., but because of his standing it would be extremely dangerous politically for the ministry to show weakness especially given that..." Mr. Weasley's face froze for a moment before he said, "Well, why doesn't really matter at the moment. Suffice it to say he has been sent back to Azkaban to serve out his sentence."

Harry frowned for a moment, a combination of Mr. Weasley's cover up and the news regarding Crouch Jr. before he asked, "How long was he sentenced for?"

Mr. Weasley gravely replied, "He's in for life for his detestable acts against your friend Neville's parents." His face cleared slightly and he

added, "I think that is enough depressing talk for the moment. Everyone else should be back soon enough, so why don't we get the table all set?" Harry smiled and together they prepared the dining room for another family dinner at the Burrow.

Molly and the kids returned a few minutes after Hermione, as the twins were shooting sparks from their wands at each other as Ginny beamed and Ron grumbled about something on the trip. Molly handed Harry one book and Hermione three before she said, "One of the good things about being fourth years. Only a couple of classes require new books. You two can pay me when you get a chance to."

With that Molly shooed everyone out of the kitchen to finish the roast, as all of the kids took their supplies and books upstairs. Ginny and Hermione were whispering excitedly about something as they entered their room while Ron continued to grumble. After placing his books in his trunk, which was already mostly ready for Hogwarts he smiled wryly at his grumbling friend before he asked, "Alright what has you in such a mood?"

Ron muttered, "They're making us get dress robes this year, did you know that?"

Harry rolled his eyes before he replied, "Yes mate, I did know that." Harry sat down on his bed across from Ron and asked, "Is that why you're so hacked off?"

Ron scowled and replied, "You know my mum got Ginny a new dress even though her booklist said that third years might not even need them. I asked her for some dress robes, and she told me that she had some from my great uncle that would look nice."

Harry nodded and then asked, "Ok, so what's the problem then?"

Ron groaned as he buried his face in his hands and mumbled, "You've never seen my great uncle Bilius before mate. Let's just say his fashion sense was a little frilly."

Harry couldn't stop the laugh from escaping his throat before he reached out and patted his friend in a consoling gesture even though he was quite certain nothing could save Ron at this point.

That night Harry's luck for the summer came to an end as his dreams of flying in the skies high above Hogwarts were preempted as he took the direct perspective of Voldemort. He was in the same room as he had been from his vision earlier in the summer. Although this time, the man he now knew as Barty Crouch Jr. was conspicuous in his absence much to Harry's self satisfaction.

Harry observed closely as his mouth moved and uttered, "Wormtail, now that you have milked Nagini I have one more task that you must complete for me tonight."

Wormtail cowered in front of him and stuttered, "Of course master, anything you wish."

Voldemort sneered at his lack of choice in servants before he said, "You must deliver this letter to the drop box set aside for young Avery. I kindly offer him an opportunity to regain my favor while he completes the task I set aside for Barty." One slim baby finger pointed at a parchment on the stand and Wormtail nodded, before he picked up the parchment and vanished with a loud pop.

Harry's eyes shot open as he slowed his heart rate and the throbbing headache he had with several deep breaths. After writing everything down that he remembered from his dream, Harry decided that sleep wasn't going to happen the rest of the night so he spent some time meditating as he had earlier in the day with Hermione and even read ahead in his new text books for the coming year.

The days leading up to the group's return to Hogwarts was spent with Hermione nagging Ron, to no avail, to complete his summer homework. The twins were trying every prank imaginable on everyone save Molly and Arthur in the household. While Ron and Ginny lacked the wherewithal to avoid the majority of the pranks directed at them, Harry and Hermione were only hit by one each, and it was the same prank at that.

It had come during one of their Occlumency training sessions as Harry had surpassed all of Hermione's expectations and they were organizing their thoughts and placing the most private of those thoughts in their locked rooms. Fred and George had been plotting

for a few days when the perfect situation presented itself as they used their new adhesive called *Sticky Wickems*.

Harry and Hermione were both in deep meditation with Hermione grasping Harry's hand as had become her practice as they progressed forward. With a flick of two wands their hands were separated slightly and the sticky pink paste covered their hands in a thin sheen. Needless to say, when Harry and Hermione pulled out of their meditation they found themselves linked in a rather embarrassing manner.

After threats from wand point from both the boy-who-lived and the brightest witch of her age the twins hastily applied the dissolving solution and promised not to prank them again.

Finally, the night before the return trip to Hogwarts found a pick up Quidditch match taking place on the pitch behind the burrow. Fred and George, being the two oldest players, were made the opposing captains. After a much bally hoed coin flip George won first pick and selected Harry. Having earned the first selection gave Fred the next two picks and he took his younger two siblings leaving Hermione to round of the teams.

Harry smiled as he took off into the sky on by far the most superior broom on the pitch doing a couple of quick loops before swooping down next to Hermione who while not a master at flying was competent enough to take the keeper position as Harry and George did everything else. Ron took the keeper position on the opposite rings as Ginny and Fred covered everything else. The quaffle, bludgers and snitched were released and after a minute the match began in earnest.

Harry flew next to Hermione and with a disarming grin said, "I'm only going for the snitch Hermione, so just make sure you don't let fifteen in and we'll win. George will protect you from those other menaces." Hermione giggled as Harry winked and shot away like a dart heading towards the other end of the pitch. It wasn't really much of a match, as George's job was to slow down Fred and Ginny while Harry had a free run at the snitch. After fifteen minutes Harry had caught the snitch ending the match, and giving his team a 150-100 victory.

As Harry did a victory lap around the field while Hermione and George were shouting cat-calls and wolf-whistles, he smiled to himself and with a grin said, "This is going to be a good year." Of course little did Harry know that this was one of those rare times when it was brightest before it grew dark for a very long time.

The next morning was complete and utter mayhem at the burrow as the Weasley spawn had neglected packing for the year until that very moment. Harry and Hermione sat at the table in the kitchen watching in amusement as Molly barked directions from across the house. After finishing their small breakfast they moved into the den next to the FLOO connection awaiting Mrs. Weasley to give them the go ahead to leave.

With everyone still rustling about upstairs Molly poked her head into the den and said, "Oh there you two are. All packed I see. If you want to go to the station early you are more than welcome dears. Just remember to say King's Cross clearly. That goes double for you Harry dear." Hermione giggled at this and Harry tried his hardest to look indignant but failed as his face cracked into a smile.

Molly smiled and said, "Oh you are such a handsome young man Harry." She turned to Hermione and added, "Take care of him now Hermione." Hermione blushed as Harry laughed at her embarrassment just as she had done to him a minute earlier.

Hermione stepped into the fireplace and made sure she had a grasp on her trunk and Crookshanks' carrier before she pinched a bit of FLOO powder and vanished in a swirl of emerald fire after she uttered her destination and threw the powder to the hearth beneath her.

Harry grasped Hedwig's cage and his trunk before he scooped some of the FLOO powder from the urn by the fireplace and uttered his destination as he once again traveled via the FLOO. Harry barely managed to keep his feet as he tumbled out of the public FLOO connection and immediately checked Hedwig to see if she was alright. All he got in response was an annoyed hoot before he tilted her cage upright once again. He spotted Hermione and she waved him over as she placed her trunk on the trolley and carried Crookshanks onto the

train with a large book nestled under her other arm, with Harry and Hedwig a step behind.

Settling on the first empty compartment they found Harry and Hermione sat down on the same side of the compartment as Crookshanks was released from his carrier and Hedwig's cage on the hook nearest the window to have a view if nothing else. Hermione smiled as he leaned his back against the corner propping his feet on the bench right next to her to take a nap. With a shy smile she said, "You can put your feet in my lap if you want to Harry. Maybe even take of your shoes too, that is if you want to?" She finished with a very light blush on her face, but couldn't conceal the slightly hopeful look on her face.

Harry slid his glasses down his nose in an eerily spot on imitation of Dumbledore, before he smiled slightly and nodded. After taking his shoes off, Harry settled back into the corner with his feet in Hermione's lap as she thumbed her book open and opened her book as she absently pet Crookshanks with her other hand. Ron and the twins entered the compartment nearly twenty minutes later, taking in the cozy little position between Harry and Hermione before she asked, "Where's Ginny boys?"

Ron muttered something about a friend of hers in Ravenclaw before he set his chess board up and proceeded to beat both Fred and George repeatedly the rest of the trip. His only sacrifice for the sake of repeatedly beating the twins was that he had to test one of the twin's new products around half way through the trip. Fred handed him the pink candy and with a smile said, "Go on try it ickle Ronniekins."

Ron sighed and swallowed the small candy after a moment of tasting it. George began to chuckle before he said, "It's our newest creation little brother. We call it the curly q." Fred pulled a mirror from his pocket just as Hermione glanced over the top of her book and began to giggle furiously, which awoke Harry. Soon everyone, Ron included, were laughing quite hard at the red haired afro he was sporting for the next thirty minutes or so.

As it began to rain outside, as the express blazed northward, Hermione glanced at her wristwatch and muttered, "We only have about an hour until we should be arriving at Hogsmeade." She glanced at Ron and the twins and ordered, "You three need to go and get changed into your robes."

As soon as the Weasleys exited the compartment it once again slid open revealing Malfoy and his two goons looking as intelligent as ever. Malfoy glanced in at Harry and Hermione and sneered before he said, "Oh well isn't this just a sight; Scarhead and the mudblood getting cozy in a compartment all by themselves. I'd watch it if I were you Potter, she might turn up pregnant just like your mother did. Then you'll be trapped to marry a mudblood just like your father."

Harry didn't say anything other than push with all of his weight on the door as it slid shut, or almost shut, as Malfoy's fingers from his wand hand were still trapped in between the door and the latch. Harry pulled the door back as Hermione's eyes had widened to the size of a pair of saucers, before he said in a deadly calm voice to the now howling platinum haired reject, "Malfoy, are you really that stupid? You just insulted my mum and my best friend in a matter of twenty seconds. Next, time your fingers will be the least of your concerns."

Hermione finally managed to verbalize her jumbled thoughts a moment later, "Harry, thank you for defending me, but I don't want you getting in trouble on my account."

Harry merely shrugged and said, "Malfoy is all talk and no action. He needs two bodyguards for a reason, because he can't fight his own battles. He'll give up eventually, or he'll push me too far..." Hermione's eyes widened and he hastened to add, "no I won't kill him so don't worry about that. Now castration on the other hand...."

Hermione was still giggling by the time Ron and the twins returned, and all Harry would say in response to their queries was, "Malfoy got on my nerves." News of Draco Malfoy and his shattered digits on his wand hand spread throughout the express like wildfire. The message had been sent, don't mess with Harry Potter. Of course, Harry's actions weren't motivated to make notice to any one other than Malfoy, but it served that purpose just the same.

As they reached Hogsmeade Harry placed Hedwig's cage in the baggage compartment of the train before exiting with Hermione and Ron to find the nearest carriage. On the way to the carriages they spotted Hagrid who waved at them briefly and said, "Ello 'ere you three."

All of them smiled and chimed, "Hello Hagrid."

Their half giant friend stroked his beard as he rounded up the first years and said, "Feel free to visit my hut, sometime outside yer' class."

With a wave they grabbed the first carriage they could and were joined by Ginny as it took off towards the castle and another year. Ron was already focused on the beginning of the year feast and said, "Oy mate, I'm getting a nice big plate of shepherd's pie and potatoes."

Harry chuckled and gave him a pat on the shoulder before he turned to Ginny and asked, "So Gin, I never asked but what electives did you pick?"

Ginny smiled at being included in the conversation and replied, "Well, unlike some slackers I know; I signed up for three. I took Runes, Arithmancy, and Care. After listening to Hermione complain about Divination and Muggle Studies all last year I figured I could take a hint."

Harry frowned and said, "Yes, it's not much fun being told I am going to die every class." He brightened and said, "Hey, maybe you two can give me an overview of runes and Arithmancy. I don't want to take the classes but it can't hurt to have some understanding of the subjects."

Hermione's eyes lit up and Ginny smiled encouragingly before she replied, "Yeah Harry, I think us girls could teach you a thing or two."

Harry laughed and said, "You can probably teach me more than that, but I'll settle for understanding the basics."

He glanced over to Hermione who was looking concerned before she said, "Harry, I appreciate that you defended me on the train. But, Professor Snape has probably already heard about it. He'll probably try to give you a detention."

Harry smiled roguishly and waved the girls in before he said in a stage whisper, "I have something prepared for Professor Snape, so don't worry about that." Hermione didn't look completely convinced, but she refrained from saying anything else on the topic the rest of the ride.

The great hall was once again in glorious form for the sorting and the feast as the trio and the other Weasleys took their seats at the Gryffindor table. Neville immediately said, "Harry, I heard you were the one that stunned that deatheater Crouch at the World Cup. I just wanted to say thanks, you know, for everything."

Harry merely nodded respectfully and in a tone that conveyed the pain of being an orphan said, "Neville, you would have done the same for me."

Neville flushed and replied, "I'm a lousy wizard Harry, I-I probably would have tripped and messed it all up."

Harry smiled and said, "Trust me Neville; you give yourself too little credit."

Neville was about to refute Harry's statement when the hook nosed potions professor snarled, "Potter, I have three students that tell me that you accosted Mr. Malfoy on the train resulting in multiple broken fingers. I'd expel you if I could, but I guess I will have to settle for a month's detention with Mr. Filch."

Harry calmly looked back at Snape, as the other staff members became interested in the scene, and said, "Professor, I didn't attack Malfoy. I was merely putting an end to the harassment that he puts me and my friends through every year. I would think it should come as now surprise sir, especially seeing as it is the same sort of harassment that *you* are guilty of Professor."

Snape became flushed with anger at this, as flushed as pale white can be anyways, before he sneered, "Just like your father, an arrogant ne'er do well who couldn't shut his mouth when dealing with his betters."

Harry began to seethe quietly before he sadly replied, "Professor, I am quite sure that comments like that would be considered abusive and unprofessional. Perhaps you would like to rephrase that *sir*."

By this point Dumbledore had reached the table and stopped Snape's final statement with a hand on his shoulder, before he turned to Harry with a twinkle in his eye and asked, "Harry, what seems to be the problem here?"

Harry sighed sadly, much of his apparent anger evaporating, before he softly said, "Professor Snape, wanted to give me a month's detention for closing my compartment door so that Malfoy couldn't slander Hermione or my mother further. I refuse to be openly baited by Malfoy or Professor Snape any more headmaster. If you side with them, then you can send me back to the Dursleys now, because as far as I'm concerned this has gone on for too long."

Dumbledore looked significantly at Snape before he said, "Yes Harry, I believe I will have a discussion with Professor Snape later." He turned and addressed the entire hall before he said, "I think that the use of questionable language and behavior that many of you in the school practice, will be punished much more severely this year. Let this be a warning to any of you who wish to cross that line." Dumbledore rather forcibly pushed Snape back up to the staff table and slowly the furor over the confrontation died down to a simmer.

Professor McGonagall, whose lips were drawn into a tight line following the Harry and Snape face off, stiffly sat the stool and sorting hat in the front of the hall. The large entrance doors swung open and the first years were ushered into the hall in a single file line.

The hat broke out into song as per custom:

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire by: JK Rowling

A thousand years or more ago,

When I was newly sewn,

There lived four wizards of renown,

Whose names are still well known:

Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,

Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,

Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,

Shrewd Slytherin, from fen.

They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,

They hatched a daring plan

To educate young sorcerers

Thus Hogwarts School began.

Now each of these four founders

Formed their own house, for each

Did value different virtues

In the ones they had to teach.

By Gryffindor, the bravest were

Prized far beyond the rest;

For Ravenclaw, the cleverest

Would always be the best;

For Hufflepuff, hard workers were

Most worthy of admission;

And power-hungry Slytherin

Loved those of great ambition.

*While still alive they did divide
Their favourites from the throng,
Yet how to pick the worthy ones
When they were dead and gone?
'Twas Gryffindor who found the way,
He whipped me off his head
The founders put some brains in me
So I could choose instead!
Now slip me snug about your ears,
I've never yet been wrong,
I'll have a look inside your mind
And tell where you belong!*

After the hat finished the sorting began and Harry clapped every time a new first year, although his mind was furiously piecing together everything that had happened in his confrontation with Snape. He was desperately trying to find anything he might have missed in retrospect. To those in the great hall they assumed Harry was upset, when in truth he had made a vow to himself to not let Snape or Malfoy get to him personally any more. Assuming that Malfoy would make a scene on the train, Harry had set up the scenario that would hopefully bring Snape and Malfoy under control for the years ahead.

Just as Harry finished his evaluation Dumbledore stood and said, "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts. As I can see, many of you look to be in dire need of a meal, so I will make the necessary announcements following the feast." Dumbledore clapped his hands as the tables filled with dozens of entrees, side dishes, and even desserts.

Harry scooped some potatoes onto his plate before he held the bowl up to Hermione and said, "Would you care for some potatoes?" Hermione nodded and Harry scooped some potatoes onto his plate as she was giving Harry a leg of turkey as was his custom for the opening feast.

Ron had a mouthful of about four things as he asked, "Mff if weally ood."

Harry eyed Ron strangely for a moment before he began to laugh uncontrollably at his ginger haired friend's antics, as Hermione glared at Ron and shook her head in annoyance. By the time the meal had finished Ron had successfully violated every possible rule of etiquette and finished it off with a nice loud belch. Harry's eyes were still dancing with mirth at his slob of a friend, when Dumbledore stood at his golden lectern and began his announcements.

"Now, that some of our baser needs have been met, I wish to once again welcome all of you to another year at Hogwarts."

The doors to the great hall swung open at the end of Dumbledore's words and a grisly looking wizard with an eye patch and a peg leg sauntered into the room. Harry frowned and asked, "Mad-Eye Moody?"

Ron nodded and said, "My dad told me that he caught more deatheaters than anyone else in the last war with he-who-must-not-be-named. He was the best auror by far at the time."

Harry nodded in thought as he watched the ex-auror stomp up to the staff table, before he gruffly sat down and took a sip from a flask. Dumbledore finally continued, "As I was saying, I have a few announcements to make for the coming term. First, we are pleased to have retired auror Alastor Moody taking over the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor." After a polite amount of applause he continued, "Once again the Forbidden Forest remains out of bounds to all students. Additionally, Mr. Filch wishes to remind students that there is to be no practicing of magic in the hallways. Also, a list of banned items may be found on the door to his office."

Everyone began to chatter, thinking Dumbledore's announcements had come to an end when a loud clap regained their attention and he said, "Finally, due to extenuating circumstances, the Quidditch Cup and house cup for the term have been suspended." Shouts of protests echoed throughout the hall and Harry furrowed his brow trying to figure out a reason.

Dumbledore's eyes were on full twinkle, "The circumstances requiring the suspension of Hogwarts' typical schedule is due to a long held tradition that had fallen out of practice and its resumption this year. A tournament is being held at the castle this year with the two other large magical schools of Europe. The Tri-Wizard tournament will be held at Hogwarts this year, as student delegations from Beauxbatons School of Magic, and from The Durmstrang Institute for the practice of magical arts. Those visitors will be guests on the ground over the duration of the tournament. Further information will be announced when it is prudent to do so. For now, Prefects please escort the students to their common rooms so that we may all rest and prepare for an exciting year ahead."

Dumbledore stepped away from his lectern as the students of Hogwarts excitedly whispered about the tri-wizard tournament. Harry frowned before he turned to the font of wisdom and asked, "Hermione, what exactly is the tri-wizard tournament?"

Hermione didn't appear too enthused by the announcement and replied, "It's a barbaric contest with one representative from each school participate in dangerous, and sometime lethal tasks. The winning school typically takes possession of the tri-wizard cup and holds it as a source of pride. But, they haven't held one in over a century because of excessive fatalities."

Harry smiled wryly and said, "Oh, sounds like it should be heaps of fun. With my luck I'll be forced into the tournament."

Hermione shook her head as they stepped onto the staircase and replied, "No Harry, in the past they had an age limit restricting anyone younger than sixth year from performing." She smiled and brightly said, "So that means no death defying stunts for you this year Mr. Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes as they stepped off of the staircase, eager to start another year at Hogwarts.

A/N: So, Harry uses some of his new found wile this chapter in an attempt to slow down Snape and Malfoy. I'm sure all of you can figure out what is going on inside of the school. The question is will the ruse work as well as it did in canon with a more observant Harry? Tune in next update, same Potter time, same Potter place.

Next chapter, we have the first defense meeting with Moody, Dumbledore deals with Snape, and the days fly by as the tri-wizard tournament approaches. Thanks to all of my great reviewers, keep up the good work.

Chapter 6

Albus Dumbledore had to admit that he was vexed in many ways by the behavior of one Harry James Potter. Having watched the young man for three years, he had thought that a certain understanding of what made the boy tick had been gained. But, following the events in the great hall and the subsequent meeting with a beleaguered Severus Snape, he had to admit to being at a complete loss.

Of course it was an easy decision to formally reprimand Severus, and then to privately force his potions master to make an oath ensuring his treatment of young Harry along with every other student would improve. Nevertheless, the official meeting with Harry Friday evening following potions was certain to be eye opening.

The first few days of classes were some of the most enjoyable of Harry's life; he was prepared for once and even openly and confidently answered questions in both charms and transfiguration. Hermione was very proud of Harry's new academic prowess, while Ron was taking a far less cheerful view of the turn of events.

Talk of Professor Moody had permeated throughout the castle. Tales of Moody's sometimes manic behavior in class had filtered to the Gryffindor fourth year students, who had just taken their seats with the Slytherins in the defense classroom awaiting their first Moody experience.

When the final Slytherin shifted into the class the door slammed shut, and a red bolt snapped out from a corner, directly aimed at Harry in the front row. Without the advantage of time Harry did the only thing he could, he dodged the spell by falling from his chair to the ground. The Slytherins all seemed to find this terribly amusing, especially Draco, until a gruff voice intoned, "Well done Mr. Potter. As for those of you who laughed, remember that when dealing with a dark wizard they won't care how graceful you look when they're trying to hex you."

The Slytherins immediately stopped laughing and Professor Mad-Eye Moody revealed himself with a wave of his wand before he stomped to the front of the classroom. Harry hopped back into his chair, his

ego more bruised than his bum, as Hermione patted his hand in a consoling nature.

Moody finally began to address the class, and after giving Harry a moment to regain his composure he said, "Five points to Gryffindor for Mr. Potter's avoidance of the spell at all costs." The grizzled ex-auror removed his eye patch and the class gasped as a swirling blue eye spun randomly taking in the entire room. He barked out a laugh of some variety before he said, "Welcome to fourth year Defense Against the Dark Arts. I've looked upon what your previous instructors have attempted to teach you and the only section I am satisfied with is the creatures that Lupin taught you lot last year. Therefore, I am taking it upon myself to do a crash course over everything else you should have covered your first two years during the first month of classes. At the conclusion of the month I will be giving a cumulative exam to determine what I should begin with in the fourth year curriculum. Those of you that score an Exceeds Expectation or higher will be offered membership in the dueling club that I will be sponsoring this year." Moody gazed over the class until the only two actually taking notes, Harry and Hermione, finished and he continued.

"Today however, I want to discuss a topic that is of vital importance to understanding how to defend against the dark arts, the darkest of the curses. The ministry has created a class of spells so dark that they've been deemed unforgivable in their usage. Use of one of these spells results in a one way ticket to Azkaban prison. Can anyone tell me one of the unforgivable curses?"

Moody's eye swiveled around glancing at the looks of fear and apprehension in the class room before he settled on Malfoy and said, "You, you're Lucius Malfoy's son aren't you?"

Draco gulped but nodded and replied, "Yes."

Moody smiled, although it looked more like a grimace, and said, "Tell me one of the unforgivable curses Mr. Malfoy."

Draco straightened his jaw before he pompously replied, "The imperius curse."

Moody gave Draco a twisted smile before he said, "That's correct Mr. Malfoy. In fact, you should be familiar with this curse; your father claimed he was under the curse to do the dark lord's bidding at the end of the last war. The imperius curse when cast upon a person places them under control of the caster, and is often used by dark wizards as a means of forcing innocent people to do terrible things. Some of the things that people under the curse do are so terrible that they would give you nightmares at night even with a dreamless sleeping draught."

Moody nodded to himself before he fixated on Neville and said, "Longbottom, can you tell me another?"

Neville cowered slightly before he stuttered out, "T-the cruciatus curse sir."

Moody grunted and said, "Aye lad the cruciatus curse. I've been placed under this curse in the past myself. Imagine being stabbed repeatedly all over your body with white hot knives while also being struck by lightning. Extended exposure has been known to cause insanity and even death."

Harry glanced back at Neville whose face had grown progressively paler as Moody continued his lecture of the curse, and Harry had to think it had something to do with the terrible things done to his parents that Mr. Weasley had mentioned.

Finally, Harry snapped his attention back to the center just as Moody's strange eye focused on him and he said, "How about you Potter? Care to tell us the final unforgivable curse."

Harry frowned as he understood that Moody was asking people directly affected by the curses and he answered, "Yes sir, the killing curse. Also known as Avada Kedavra, it kills people without leaving a mark aside from the vacant expressions that its victims are left with. Both of my parents were killed by the curse and this scar on my head is my evidence that I survived it."

Moody deflated slightly as Harry had sussed out where he was going with his lecture and he said, "Aye Potter, that's another five points to Gryffindor for the most complete answer yet." Moody's eyes

refocused on the class and he said, "The killing curse was exactly as Mr. Potter described it, a silent killer. There is no known way to block this curse or any of the other unforgivables. But, only those with corrupt or tainted souls can perform these curses. Intent is the most important thing for these curses. For example, all of you could cast a killing curse at me, but since you lack the intent of murder than the worst you'd give me is a nosebleed. The imperius curse is much the same. If one of you tried to cast it on me I wouldn't even feel compelled to do what you told me to. The cruciatus curse is the most interesting of the curses. If you have any anger that can be directed at me then you can cast the curse. But, the pain I would feel would be minimal at best. Those that can cast the curse and cause those the pain that I described are truly evil and sadistic people." Moody glanced around at the now spellbound group and with a scowl said, "Well get on with it. I'm not going to repeat myself so you better start taking this down."

After a moment to allow everyone to scribble something down on their parchments he continued his lecture, "Now we are going to review what you should have been taught in you first year here." The rest of the class was spent trying to undo the damage caused by the ineffective teachings of their possessed defense professor from their first year.

Potions on Friday were much as they had been earlier in the week, Snape merely ignored Harry and his friends. While this was an improvement over his previous behavior it still left the Gryffindors in the lurch as to actually learning something in the class. At one point in particular Harry raised his hand to ask a question about the brewing of his calming draught. Snape didn't even spare a glance in Harry's direction for the five minutes his hand was raised, before he finally lowered it in defeat and simply followed Hermione's by the book advice on the potion.

As they all handed in their potions and began to exit the classroom Dumbledore stepped into the room and said, "Ah Harry, would you care to join Professor Snape and me for the meeting we discussed up in my office following dinner?"

Harry eyed the headmaster with an emotion the old wizard couldn't place for a moment before he nodded and said, "Yes sir that should be fine."

Dumbledore smiled serenely at Harry as the younger wizard left the classroom and the two professors alone with their own thoughts. Harry's mind was swirling with possibilities as he entered the great hall and spotted Hermione and Ron in what appeared to be the beginnings of one of their famous rows. Harry hastened his pace and sat down next to Hermione and directly across from Ron before he said, "Hey guys, did I miss anything?"

Hermione nearly growled as she said, "Ronald seems to think that I've somehow brainwashed you into being just like me."

Harry arched an eyebrow as he asked in an amused tone, "Mate, do you think that Hermione's brainwashed me?"

Ron sat the sweet roll he was eating before he cleared his throat and replied, "It's the only explanation I can think of. Last year, we were making up answers on our divination homework and now you are actually researching and reading before you hand in your assignments. I mean bloody hell Harry; you've actually gained more points for Gryffindor than Hermione."

Harry smiled as Hermione spooned some yams onto his plate and he muttered his thanks before he turned to Ron and with a shrug said, "It's nothing personal against you mate, my priorities have changed is all. I mean we only get one chance at Hogwarts, might as well make the most of it, you know?"

Ron grunted before he nodded reluctantly and decided to dig into his meal earnestly, leaving his two best friends to fend for themselves. As Ron's attention waned Hermione took a sip of her pumpkin juice before she asked, "What did the headmaster want Harry?"

Harry sighed as he pushed a stray yam around on his plate before he replied, "We're having our meeting up in his office after dinner."

Hermione nodded before she asked, "Since you aren't going to tell me outright, I suppose I'll ask; what's the matter?"

Harry looked up from his plate, locking eyes with Hermione before he said, "I have absolutely no clue what Dumbledore is going to pull. But, I just have a bad feeling about it."

Hermione gave Harry a reassuring smile before she said, "Expect the headmaster to work in the student populace's interests, and if he doesn't then remind him of his obligations." Harry gave her a fleeting smile before he finished his meal in silence.

Upon finishing he reached over and squeezed Hermione's hand in an attempt to draw some strength from her before he stood and exited the great hall en route to the headmaster's office. The gargoyle was slid aside in anticipation of his presence and it slid back into place behind him as he took the spiral staircase up the headmaster's office.

Harry slowly entered the headmaster's office spotting Snape off in a corner to the side of Dumbledore who was ensconced snugly behind his desk. Dumbledore smiled and motioned with his hand towards a chair in front of his desk before he said, "Welcome Harry, I assure you that this won't take long my boy."

Harry nodded and sat down in his chair waiting for Dumbledore to make the first move. After a very uncomfortable minute of silence Dumbledore said, "Harry, I understand your concerns about the treatment at the hands of Professor Snape. But, there are factors that are unseen by you and the other students that take precedence over your discomfort."

Harry slid his glasses down his nose slightly before he peered over his wire rimmed glasses and said, "I'm sorry professor but I was unaware that your concerns extended beyond providing a quality education to the students of the school. Part of that quality education is the fair and honest teaching of potions." Sliding his glasses back up his nose he smiled and congenially said, "Surely you can understand my concerns *headmaster*."

Dumbledore blinked, caught slightly off balance by Harry's more formal use of his headmaster title and replied, "Harry, I really must insist that you trust my judgment on this."

Harry rubbed at his temples for a moment before he said, "Professor, if you aren't willing to force Professor Snape to teach everyone potions without the use of intimidation or bullying, then I must admit a total loss of faith in your judgment. Just today I had my hand raised for five minutes in an attempt to have a question about the potions we were brewing today answered, and Professor Snape completely ignored me. Instead the *good* professor basically completed Malfoy's potion for him so that he could receive an O for the class."

Dumbledore sighed as he ran his fingers through his beard before he turned to Snape and said, "Severus, I will hold off on any formal punishment. But, if Mr. Potter comes forward with any further accusations of this nature, or if a student in another class does then you will be terminated on spot. I will be plenty busy the remainder of this year tending to accommodations for the tournament, so I hope that this is the final time I am required to have this discussion with you."

Snape's face was contorted into a very unpleasant expression, which if Harry had to describe would be a strain of emotional constipation. The potions master finally managed a stiff nod before Dumbledore once again turned to Harry and said, "I hope this arrangement will be to your liking, Harry."

Harry stood from his seat and baldly said, "Thank you professor, and I will be keeping a close eye on Professor Snape's behavior the remainder of my time here at Hogwarts. If that is everything for now, I have a group project with Hermione for Herbology that needs to be tended to in the greenhouse." Dumbledore nodded and Harry purposefully strode out of the room satisfied with the turn of events.

The following two weeks went by in the blink of an eye as Hogwarts prepared for the coming arrival of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. Snape had managed two weeks of unbiased teaching and several students began to reap the benefits of an unbiased potions professor. If the house cup competition was being officially held, as opposed to the arbitrary awarding of points that had been taking place, then Slytherin house would be a distant fourth without the penal behavior of Snape towards the other houses and blatant favoritism towards his own house.

The third Friday of the month also happened to be Hermione's birthday and for once Harry planned a small party with a cake for her in the common room after everyone else had gone to bed. Having already given his gift of a book on Numerology and a gift certificate to Flourish and Blott's he managed to pull her aside after charms and he said, "Make sure you're in the common room around eleven tonight, ok?" Hermione merely nodded as her mind whirled with possibilities as to what Harry had planned.

Ron was understandably out of sorts when Harry and Ginny mentioned the prior evening, that the next day was Hermione's birthday. Having never given thought to the female member of the trio aside from her mental prowess, Ron groaned and sat about trying to figure out a gift before her party the following night.

Thanks to a suggestion from Sirius in his last letter Harry had gained access to the kitchens and happened upon nearly half of the house elf population of the school. Harry immediately recognized Dobby and Winky, as they had been seemingly isolated from the rest of the group. Winky, still resplendent in her pillowcase from her last master, appeared to be drunk as her tiny hands were grasped around a mug of butterbeer.

Harry frowned before he called out to Dobby, "Dobby, can you help me with something please?"

The little elf that had nearly done more harm than good lit up like a light bulb as he excitedly scampered over to Harry before he squealed, "Oh Master Harry Potter sir, Dobby is being so happy so sees you."

"Dobby, could you help me make a birthday cake for my friend Hermione. We're having a party tomorrow night at eleven in the Gryffindor common room. If I make the cake, can you deliver it then?" Harry asked in his gentlest voice.

Dobby twisted his hands anxiously before he asked, "But Harry Potter, is wanting to make the cake all by themselves?"

Harry nodded and said, "Hermione doesn't believe in exploiting the house elves any more than we already do. Seeing as how this is for a

birthday party, she wouldn't be pleased to know I had you do the work for me."

It only took another half an hour for Harry to be granted access to the kitchens, and by midnight Harry had finished the birthday cake and procured Dobby's word to deliver the cake at the predetermined time.

Hermione's party was a rousing success as Ron gifted the birthday girl a couple of his spares from his chocolate frog card collection, and Ginny had already given her a set of magical beauty supplies. Hermione's brightest part of the night was when Dobby arrived with the Harry made cake, which incidentally also happened to be her favorite flavor of cake in the world, carrot cake. After giving Harry a chaste kiss on the lips as she thanked him once again before retreating to bed, said boy wizard went to sleep with a smile on his face that he was still wearing the next morning when he woke up.

Classes had been going by at an unprecedented pace as they dealt with bubotubers in a group project for Herbology, dealing with a frightening new creature called a blast ended skrewt in Hagrid's class, the placement exam for defense with Moody (Harry got an E, Hermione got an O, and Ron got an A), and assorted other assignments in the rest of their classes.

By the second week in October Harry and Hermione had made so much progress in their Occlumency that they began to discuss the next step in the process, being tested by a legilimens as was suggested at the end of the book.

As they sat in the common room watching the fire slowly die down Harry said, "Hermione, I was thinking we could ask Professor Lupin about finding us a trained legilimancer. Do you think he might know one?"

Hermione's eyes lit up as she turned towards Harry and said, "Oh that's a brilliant idea Harry. I'm certain Professor Lupin would have access to a trained and trustworthy legilimancer. We should send out a letter tomorrow morning with Hedwig."

Harry nodded before he sat down and wrote a quick letter requesting a recommendation for a trustworthy master of legilimency that could

aid them in their independent study of Occlumency. Harry was fairly certain that everything he had shared with Sirius up to that point was forwarded to Remus as well so the context for the request should speak for itself.

If there was one thing that bothered Harry as the days melted away was how Ron had started to distance himself from the two resident bookworms of the house. While they still joked and played chess, Harry felt a chasm building that while neither of them acknowledged its existence could be still be felt during the strangest of times. Times in the previous year when instead of doing his homework he would skive off and play a game of chess with Ron, or some exploding snap with Ron and the twins, now were spent revising his assignments or working on his side projects with Hermione.

Talk throughout the school still centered on the impending Tri-wizard tournament, and Harry couldn't help but notice seeing the dreamy look on Ron's face when the glory of past champions was discussed. After some heavy discussion between Harry and Hermione their respective pet projects for the year were to be started early on the final Sunday of October, less than a week away from Halloween.

Harry quietly crept down the stairs from the fourth year boy's dormitory and smiled as he saw Hermione sitting in the couch by the fire although it appeared she had a stack of parchment and books accompanying her.

Harry made his presence known as he sat down on the far end of the couch and said, "Hey."

Hermione, who was dressed in her pajamas and had her hair pulled back into a tail, smiled and softly said, "Hey Harry. Let's get to work so we can get some sleep."

Harry yawned, before he smiled sheepishly and asked, "Um, do you have the potion all prepared?"

Hermione arched an eyebrow before she pulled a pair of vials from her pocket and said, "This is the animagus revealing potion. If you glow blue after drinking the vial then you have a form. If you don't

glow at all then you don't have a form. The form should be revealed in five minutes time; if it isn't then you don't have a form."

Harry took the offered vial and smiled at Hermione before he said, "Bottoms up."

Hermione nodded as they both gulped down the viscous potion and waited the required five minutes to see if they indeed had forms. At three minutes Harry began to glow a bright luminous blue meaning he had a form of some sort and the training could continue. The fourth minute passed and Hermione had yet to glow in the slightest. Finally, just before the standard five minutes expired Hermione began to glow in a slightly fainter blue than Harry had but still signifying that she had a form of her own.

Hermione released a sigh of relief before she said, "Harry, I have a copy of the protocol necessary to master an animagus transformation. I want you to take the copy and read and memorize the first ten steps. Fortunately, the Occlumency we've been doing should speed the process some." Hermione's eyes began to sparkle with excitement before she said, "Now it's time to begin planning for our group to help the house elves."

Harry yawned but nodded and asked, "Do you have any plans for the organization of the group?"

Hermione handed Harry a piece of parchment with a complete outline of her initial plans for the group. After carefully reading the outline he asked, "Any ideas for what you want to call it?"

Hermione bit her lip before she firmly said, "S.P.E.W or the society for the promotion of elfish welfare."

Harry shook his head and said, "Hermione, you're never going to get anyone to join a group that is called spew."

Hermione's eyes flashed for a moment before she defiantly said, "It's not spew Harry it is S.P.E.W."

Harry reached over and grasped Hermione's hand before he said, "I know what you call it, but people will call it spew. Trust me."

Hermione deflated before she asked, "So, do you have a suggestion, since you think S.P.E.W is pants."

Harry smirked and replied, "I've actually put some thought into this. For those twenty minutes while I was awake during Binn's class I came up with a perfect name."

Hermione arched a skeptical eyebrow and she prodded teasingly, "Oh the suspense is killing me."

Harry chuckled and said, "Ok, it's kind of similar to your name. I came up with S.P.H.E.R.E, or the society for the promotion of house elf rights and education. I admire what you've come up with for the initial goals of the group, but I think some of them are too ambitious."

Hermione relaxed slightly apparently accepting of Harry's suggestion before she said, "Ok, by all means then Harry."

Harry stifled another yawn before he said, "It's not realistic to immediately free all of the house elves. Most elves don't want to be freed. Dobby was treated about as poorly as an elf can be treated, so I reckon that's why he didn't fall to pieces like that elf at the world cup did. You remember Winky right?"

Hermione nodded and Harry frowned before he said, "She's been so depressed since she was freed that even though she is working here at Hogwarts, she has taken up drinking." Harry expelled a breath before he added, "I'm pretty sure that as long as house elves are treated with kindness and compassion they would have no desire to be freed. As it is Dobby calls me master half the time, and I wager he's trying to drop a hint to me."

Hermione sighed heavily before she said, "Ok, so what do you suggest?"

Harry rubbed at his eyes tiredly before he replied, "I think we need to increase awareness of why having house elves as slaves and not employees is wrong. Once society accepts that fact, then we can get the elves to accept it. I've done a bit of reading out of some of Dudley's old history books and I think this is a lot like the civil rights

movement in the states. It will be a long uphill battle, but nothing worth having is ever easy.”

Harry’s words seemed to bolster Hermione’s spirits considerably as she smiled brightly before she covered a dainty yawn of her own. Accepting the progress made for the night she asked, “When should we have our first meeting?”

Harry pondered for a moment before he answered, “I think we should wait until the other two schools get here. The more people we can expose to this the better.”

Hermione smiled appraisingly and as she gathered up her books and notes she said, “You’ve really put a lot of thought into this Harry.”

Harry yawned as he stood before he replied, “It means a lot to you, and therefore it means a lot to me.” Hermione blushed prettily in the firelight and she murmured a good night before she ran up the stairs to the girl’s dorm. Harry followed a moment later with a bemused smile as he took the stairs at a far more pedestrian speed.

A/N: Ok, now we’re all set up for the arrival of the other two schools and the drawing of the champions. If any of you would like more detail on bubotubers or Skrewts read the books, or go to the Harry Potter lexicon.

Any of you that are concerned with Ron’s distance from Harry and Hermione, don’t despair, they will come to an understanding before the year is over reaffirming their friendship. Remember I’m trying not to go too AU this story so anything that I breezed over is canon plain and simple.

Thanks to all of you that have reviewed earlier chapters, and as always I try to answer the vast majority of the reviews. Thanks for reading and remember to review.

Chapter 7

Sitting in his small cabin near Cambridge Remus Lupin was puzzling over the letter he had just received from the boy that for all intents and purposes was the closest thing to a nephew he would ever have. He had been amazed by everything that had taken place on the fateful night four and a half months ago. But, perhaps the greatest surprise was the miraculous feats of magic Harry had managed to perform to save Sirius, Hermione, and himself from the dementors.

Remus knew how important it was for anyone to have friends that could be trusted, and he was quite happy that Harry had finally begun to listen to one Hermione Granger. It hadn't been difficult to see that the previous year Harry had sided with his other friend Ron Weasley, a bit more than the extremely bright Ms. Granger. Unlike everyone else, Remus had seen Hermione's boggart during her final exam, and had created a cover story to protect the young witch's buried feelings for Harry.

From the few letters he had received from Sirius over the summer and fall, Remus had an inkling that Harry had finally awoken to the reality of the young witch's feelings. In fact, Sirius had gushed in a recent letter when Harry's had asked for advice as to how he could make the first move in a relationship. Banishing his own fond memories of young love, Remus finally began to ponder the best way to go about completing this rare task from Harry.

It was for that reason and that reason alone that he fully believed Harry's claim of learning Occlumency with Hermione, and that it didn't fall upon deaf ears. One of the benefits of being a known intellectual in small wizarding circles was that he had gathered several favors to various people of influence. Most people worth knowing understood that lycanthropy was an affliction and no one ever actually chosen to be as such. Therefore, the petty bigoted attitudes of several affluent but stupid purebloods were often ignored and the worth of the individual was what mattered.

One of those favors he had accumulated in the past happened to be with a wizard who was extremely well versed in the arts of

Occlumency and legilimency, William Hardison, the head obliuator in the MLE for the ministry of magic.

After apparating to the approved apparition point just outside of the ministry of magic's underground entrance, Remus walked inside and a guard asked, "Name and reason for business today guvnah."

Remus smiled as he straightened his vest before he replied, "Remus Lupin here to visit William Hardison."

The guard nodded as he took Remus' wand and swiped his own wand over it, before he returned the wand and said, "Next check point you will be given the appropriate security pass to see Mr. Hardison. According to the manifesto today he is working with the auror academy cadets for about twenty more minutes. His secretary should let you into his office and you can wait for him there."

Remus pocketed his wand and smiled his thanks, and ten minutes and another check point later he found himself sitting in his friend's office waiting to ask for a major favor. Eight minutes later, as Remus had finally tired of watching the magical metronome on his friend's desk, the door swung open and a short slim man with bright blue eyes that simply reeked of intelligence strode into the room with a lithe witch who had bright pink hair that was spiked up in a most peculiar way.

Remus stood from his seat and greeted his friend warmly, "Ah Will my good man it has been far too long."

William Hardison looked startled for a moment before he smiled and said, "Remy?"

Remus nodded as they shook hands and patted each other on the back heartily for a long moment, before the pink haired witch cleared her throat and the moment was broken. Will shook his head but the grin on his face didn't slip at all as he said, "Ah right sorry about that Ms. Tonks. This is my old friend Remus Lupin. We went to Hogwarts together. Remus, Lily Potter, and I spent many an hour inside the library doing one thing or the other."

The young witch Will had just called Ms. Tonks looked thoughtful for a moment before she was startled as Remus asked, "Ms. Tonks, you wouldn't happen to know Andy Tonks, would you?"

The bubble gum haired witch blinked and then replied, "That's my mum, erm Mr. Lupin." Tonks couldn't help but scrutinize the older man in front of her, and ultimately she found that she liked what she was looking at.

She blinked as Will handed her a paper and said, "Now this is the proper protocol for an obliviation Ms. Tonks. I do so hope that this time you can keep track of it." Tonks nodded and gave a polite wave to the two men before stumbling out of the office clumsily.

Remus shook his head at the witch as the door closed, before he turned back to his friend and said, "Will, I'm afraid my visit isn't completely about pleasure."

Will motioned him to a seat before taking his own and with a smile asked, "Come to trade in on one of those favors I owe you?"

Remus nodded and said, "Yes, Will this is for someone you might know of as well." Will looked expectantly at him before Remus said, "It's for Lily's sprog Will."

Will's eyes widened as Remus continued, "Harry and one of his friends have been learning Occlumency, and after some thought I figured you might help them learn legilimency as well."

Will sighed and nodded before he asked, "Young Harry and his friends have become quite famous here at the ministry Remus. Perhaps you can tell me which of his friends?"

Remus nodded as he steepled his fingers and said, "I have reason to believe she might be the next brilliant witch to join the Potter family."

Will's eyes widened as a fond smile crossed his lips and he said, "Ms. Granger then. I have to admit that it is an uncanny thing, Potter males and their attraction to the brightest witches of their age. Of course some would say that it can be traced back to Rowena Ravenclaw, but that's neither here nor there."

Remus nodded and said, "I was thinking we could arrange something over the coming summer to get Harry away from his muggle relatives. According to a friend of mine Harry visited the Grangers for a week. I'm sure we can arrange something a little lengthier to give you the necessary time to teach them."

Will nodded before he opened a desk drawer to pull a tumbler of brandy from his desk as he pushed a button on his desk and said, "Maggie, cancel my meetings for the rest of the day, I have some catching up to do with an old friend."

At Hogwarts an announcement had been posted indicating that the other schools would be arriving the night before Halloween, and that all students were required to meet outside of the school to greet their guests. One of the new developments as a result of Harry's new academic approach was that he had become more doted upon by Professor McGonagall in the same way that the typically stern professor had always doted upon Hermione in the past.

Harry, Hermione, and Ron were standing next to Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall as they awaited the other school's arrivals outside of Hogwarts near the great lake. Ron had been growing more and more excited about Viktor Krum's arrival to Hogwarts since it had been announced. The day of the arrival he was impossible to talk to as he babbled on about Viktor Krum and his phenomenal Quidditch skills.

As they stood patiently he blurted, "Oh man Harry, Krum he's going to be here in a few minutes. I wonder if I can get his autograph?"

Harry and Hermione shared a smile before Harry said, "I'm sure if you ask him nicely mate, he'd be happy to give you an autograph."

Ron's attention had been lost however; as he entered one of his various Quidditch wet dreams involving Krum and the rest of the world had been put on hold. After waiting a moment for a response Harry turned to Hermione and asked, "Do you think Ron could manage to think about something aside from Quidditch, or is his brain overloaded at this point?"

Hermione giggled and replied, "Well, for the time being I would say that when Quidditch enters the equation, Ron becomes pretty much of a single mind. We just have to wait until this episode passes and then we can get him distracted from Quidditch."

Harry chuckled and with a disarming grin said, "Yeah, we need to get some real shiny objects for that." Hermione rolled her eyes but grinned in response.

Finally, Professor McGonagall turned to the headmaster and said, "Albus, it appears as though the Beauxbaton's contingency is off in the horizon. Dumbledore looked in the late dusk sky before he replied, "Yes, it appears as though Maxime has decided to arrive by air."

Harry, Hermione, and several other students watched as a large flying object slowly came into view. As it drew nearer one could make out several large flying horses and an enormous carriage behind it. The Carriage began to slow as it neared the castle and it veered off towards the area behind the castle where Hagrid could be made out waving the horses to the ground and land. A few minutes later the horses, now walking, galloped up to the Hogwarts students before halting as the door to the huge carriage swing open and a set of stairs magically folded out to the ground.

The students close to the carriage all took several steps backwards as they warily waited for the Beauxbaton's students exit the carriage. First out of the carriage was an enormous woman that Harry would have sworn was related to Hagrid if not for her extremely refined exterior. She was followed by a very attractive blonde witch and then the rest of the students, mostly female, all dressed in powder blue dress uniforms of varying types.

The large woman walked up to Dumbledore who bowed before taking her hand and kissing it in a very gentlemanly manner before he said, "Ah Maxime, how wonderful to see you once again. I dare say you must all be very tired. Hagrid will set up your quarters and take care of your graceful valets.

The large woman nodded and said, "Zank you Albus, that would be most welcome." Professor Flitwick led the group into the castle as the remainder waited for Durmstrang to arrive.

Harry turned to Ron, who appeared to be back amongst the living before he said, "Ron, Durmstrang should be here any minute now. Maybe you can get Krum's autograph now?"

Ron's eyes lit up for a moment before he sulked and said, "I don't have anything to write on or anything to write with."

Harry shrugged before he turned to Hermione and asked, "How do you think Durmstrang will arrive?"

Hermione bit her lip in thought before she answered, "Well Beauxbatons arrived by the air, and we arrived by land. So, I guess they'll have to arrive by water."

Harry nodded and glanced out at the far end of the great lake where it extended out into the sea, waiting for sign of a ship. Hermione shook her head and smiled as she glanced at where Harry was looking, but she had read enough to understand that most magical ships were like muggle submarines in that they traveled long distances underwater. As she glanced out in the great lake a massive ship, roughly a quarter of the size of Hogwarts, surfaced and she idly wondered, amidst the gasps of various students, how it could fit into the small alcove that was the great lake. Jerking on Harry's arm to get his attention she pointed out the ship and his eyes widened at its immense size. Within minutes several smaller boats, much like the ones they floated in their first year, were floating towards the shore.

A few minutes later the first boat emptied as two young men and one older man with a goatee walked up to Dumbledore. The older man grasped Dumbledore's hand before he said, "Ah Albus it has been too long. Perhaps we can move inside soon, Viktor here has come down with a bit of a cold, and we don't want him ill for the tournament."

Harry finally turned and locked gazes with Krum whose eyes also lit up with recognition as he glanced up at Harry's scar before he nodded and the entire group began to migrate back to the castle. As they walked back to the castle Harry sighed and said to no one in particular, "Why do I have the feeling this is the beginning of something very bad?"

Hermione rolled her eyes before she said, "Remember what I said Harry, no death defying stunts for you this year." Harry chuckled as he playfully punched Hermione in the shoulder before wrapping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her close for the rest of the walk. Neither caught the frown on Viktor Krum's face as Hermione leaned her head on Harry's shoulder, and she began to discuss the ways that champions had been selected for the tournament in the past.

The great hall had been magically enlarged to accommodate to more large tables even though a sign posted on the doors to the great hall indicated that seating at any table during the tournament was acceptable. Harry watched with amusement as Ron began drifting towards Krum until the seeker was surrounded by a posse of Durmstrang students who nearly carried him to a seat near the front.

As Harry's eyes tracked to the front he noticed a large object covered with a sheet next to the headmaster's lectern. Taking their typical seats at the Gryffindor table, Ron sat down dejectedly across from them making a bit of a scene to those around him as he groaned about not being able to get Krum's autograph.

After the large feast was finished the hall continued to buzz with excitement over what the object covered in the sheet was. Hermione was at a loss because in the past the selection of champions was done in a completely arbitrary manner ranging from a vote of their peers, to hog tossing, although the hog tossing bit had gone out of style nearly six hundred years ago.

Finally Dumbledore and the man Harry recognized from the Quidditch World Cup, Barty Crouch Sr., stood next to the large object before Dumbledore flicked his wand and the sheet vanished revealing a large cup that appeared to be enclosed at the moment. Crouch pulled his wand and did a few intricate movements before the cup slowly opened revealing a blue flame, much like the ones Hermione was so adept at making, flickered out of the top of the cup.

Dumbledore turned to the crowd and said, "Welcome, welcome everyone to the opening ceremony of the tri-wizard tournament. As all of you can see the mode of champion selection shall be a very old

and very powerful magical artifact known as the goblet of fire. I shall allow Mr. Crouch to explain further.”

Barty Crouch was a rather jittery man, but Harry wondered how much of that had to do with the business of his son being caught. Shaking those thoughts aside Harry listened as Crouch spoke, “To those of you that enter your name into the goblet of fire I warn you this, upon entering your name you enter into magical contract and the only ways out of it are having your magic stripped or death. The eventual winner of the tournament will receive 1000 galleons and the eternal glory of their name on the cup.”

Crouch apparently having finished his short speech settled back a few feet and gave Dumbledore the floor once again. Dumbledore nodded to Crouch before he said, “After much deliberation a more strict age requirement than in the past has been adopted for entrants in the tournament.” Several in the crowd groaned and with a glance over at Ron Harry realized that his best mate was amongst them. Dumbledore waited for the various groans to stop before he continued, “Therefore the age limit has been raised from fifteen, as it was in the past, to seventeen for this year’s incarnation of the tournament.”

Harry turned to Hermione and with a slight grin asked, “I thought you told me it had been sixteen every time before?”

Hermione actually look distressed before she managed to squeak out, “There must have been a misprint in my edition of Hogwarts a History.”

Harry smiled fondly and reached out for her hand giving it a quick squeeze before he turned his attention back to Dumbledore who was now waiting for the next round of boos to subside, this time from the Weasley Twins more so than their younger brother. Finally, the boos stopped and Dumbledore glanced at the pair of trouble makers he suspected would most likely attempt to beat the rule as he added, “I will be personally placing an age line around the cup preventing anyone younger than the required age from entering. If any of you does attempt to cross the age line, you will find the punishment most apt for the crime.”

Dumbledore's telltale twinkle returned as he continued, "Any of you that wish to enter must enter your names in the goblet before this time tomorrow. At which time the champions from each of the schools will be selected. Students of Hogwarts please feel free to welcome our guests and to treat them in a most hospitable manner. They will be walking the halls and using the library as necessary to complete their own school work for the year. Good night and good luck to all of you that enter."

As they exited the great hall Ron was positively gushing as he spoke to Harry, "Harry mate, think about it, all of those galleons and eternal glory."

Harry shook his head as Hermione had scampered ahead and was discussing something with Ginny as they occasionally giggled about something. Harry's attention snapped back to Ron who was looking at him expectantly and Harry replied, "Ron, from what Hermione told me the tournament is very dangerous. People have died in it in the past. Take it from me, having money and fame isn't all they're cracked up to be."

Ron scowled and said, "Well unlike you I'm afraid I don't have the luxury of having new clothes and a broom that isn't rubbish." Ron's face became defiant as he said, "I heard the twins say something about an aging potion. I'm going to nick some from them and enter the goblet tomorrow. We'll see who's laughing when I win the tournament."

Harry rolled his eyes in frustration as he grasped his friend's tense shoulder and said, "Ron listen, if Dumbledore is putting up an age line then there is no way a simple aging potion will work. Let it go and maybe the tournament will come back for our seventh year and you can enter then." Ron merely shrugged his shoulder from Harry's hand and with an angry look stomped through the portrait opening and up to their dorm.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off a headache as he walked more slowly up the stairs, trying to think of a way to keep Ron from embarrassing himself tomorrow. When Harry reached the room Neville and Seamus were playing some gobstones on Neville's bed

and after they asked him to play and Harry turned them down, he glanced over at Ron's four-poster and frowned as the draped had already been pulled around it. All Harry knew was that there was no talking sense into Ron when he got like this.

Friday morning, incidentally Halloween morning, Harry awoke trying not to dwell on the date that always led him back to thinking about his parent's murder and what might have been. Harry glanced over at Ron's bed not at all surprised to see Ron already gone for the day. Harry shook his head and sighed as he rolled out of bed thinking about all of the ways this was going to blow up in his friend's face.

After a rousing nap in Binn's class Harry found himself in Charms with Flitwick as he glanced around for Ron who was now absent from his first two classes of the day. Harry turned to Hermione as Flitwick took roll and asked, "Do you know where Ron is?"

Hermione sighed as she twirled her quill between her fingers before she replied, "Ginny told me this morning that Ron and the twins were going to use an aging potion to beat the age line. My guess is that they're in the hospital wing following their spectacularly horrific failure"

Harry chuckled before he asked, "Hospital wing after a quick lunch then?" Hermione patted Harry on the hand sweetly before she turned her attention to Flitwick as the tiny professor began to teach the group switching spells.

After a quick lunch Harry and Hermione jogged to the hospital wing, and anything they had been preparing for paled in comparison to the three miniature versions of Albus Dumbledore sitting in the first three beds of the hospital wing.

Hermione was covering her mouth in an attempt to prevent the giggles from escaping her and Harry wasn't making any effort to cover his barks of laughter before he managed to sputter out, "I s-see the aging potion didn't work. Or did it work too well?" Harry managed a sheepish grin to the three glaring Dumbledores before Ron answered.

“Don’t make an effort to refrain from laughing at our expense. It’s not like we haven’t visited *you* in the hospital wing in the past.” Ron/Dumbledore growled at Harry.

Harry’s laughs slowly subsided as Hermione was no closer to winning her own battle before he said, “I don’t understand Ron. I warned you not to try and enter, and now you’re taking it out on me?”

Ron crossed his arms and his glare grew even colder before Harry turned to Fred and George and said, “Well, I just wanted to see if you three were doing alright. I know where I’m not wanted.” Harry slowly left the hospital wing never sparing a glance back at the Weasleys.

Hermione was seething as she laid into Ron, “I can’t believe how stupid you’re being Ronald. Harry was concerned about you, and despite his disagreement with you over the aging potion, he talked me into coming with him to see how you and Heckle and Jeckle were doing. What does he get when he visits? A pathetic immature prat that isn’t worth the dirt on his trainers when you act like you have today. Think about that.” Hermione left with all of the speed that Harry didn’t as she furiously stomped out of the hospital wing.

Fred turned to Ron and said, “You know little brother-”

“You’ve really stepped in it this time.” George finished. Ron could only manage a pathetic groan as he buried his hands in his beard in response.

Hermione finally caught up with Harry in the dungeons as he entered the potions classroom for another fun filled day with Snape and the Slytherins. Harry took his seat with a blank expression on his face although inside he furious, sad, and confused trying to deal with his current feelings towards one Ronald Weasley. Hermione sat down, her anger spent and overwhelmed by her concern for Harry softly asked, “Are you ok Harry?”

Harry blinked as his internal musings were interrupted and he replied, “I don’t know really. I might have overreacted some with Ron, but he was really acting like a git.”

Hermione shook her head vehemently and said, "No Harry, this is Ron's mess and he needs to clean it up."

Harry smiled weakly and nodded before he said, "No death defying stunts right."

Hermione rolled her eyes as she pushed her shoulder into Harry's just as Snape walked into the room much like he was akin to, cloak billowing and greasy hair remaining in place. If the year had been good for one thing, it was the leash Snape and by proxy Malfoy had been placed under by Dumbledore. Without Snape's favoritism Harry had become a solid potions student getting mostly E's and a few O's on all of his assignments and potions.

Today Snape began his lecture looking rather agitated about something as he said, "Today we are going to be working on counter agents to aging potions. Three idiotic Gryffindors attempted to cross the age line and enter the tournament and Madam Pomfrey has no stores for such an unusual potion. It is not difficult to make and the directions for brewing are on the board behind me. The first 3 correct potions brewed will receive ten points for their house each. Get to work!"

Nearly an hour and a half later Harry, Hermione, and Draco each received ten points and for once even Harry had to admit that Malfoy was a decent potions brewer. As they exited the classroom Harry and Hermione overheard Malfoy speaking to Crabbe and Goyle, "I heard that Krum entered earlier today. Too bad there isn't a good contestant from Hogwarts. Zabini told me that the best upperclassman to enter was Diggory from Hufflepuff. At least if he's selected we'll have a pureblood representing the school. Father tried to pull some strings so that I could enter but they wouldn't allow it. If they let in anyone younger than a sixth year I'm sure Potter would enter. I've never seen such a glory hound before."

Harry shook his head as he tuned out Malfoy before he turned to Hermione and said, "I heard Angelina was thinking about entering. She has a birthday like you so she could enter unlike Fred and George. I wouldn't mind if Cedric got in though, he's a good guy."

Hermione nodded and then hesitantly asked, "Harry, what are you going to do about Ron?"

Harry frowned and Hermione thought his eyes teared up a little whether from sadness or frustration before he replied, "He has to make the first move this time Hermione. I understand his life isn't perfect, but whose is? I'd trade anything to have a family of my own. But, it's not going to happen anytime soon. The closest thing to family I have are two thirty something men that knew my parents. That's hardly what I'd call an extended family."

Hermione grasped his hand and said, "Someday you can start your own family with some lucky witch, and then you'll have your family."

Harry flushed and muttered, "If I survive, that's one thing I look forward to very much." Hermione heard his mutterings but decided to let them pass because she really couldn't think of anything to add without making herself too obvious.

The great hall was buzzing as dinner wound down and the various ministry personnel closely connected to the tournament had taken residence up at an enlarged staff table as they awaited the drawing of the three champions. Ron and the twins had been administered the potions and were sitting at the far end of the Gryffindor table. Harry tried to make eye contact with Ron but he seemed to be avoiding the temptation to even look in Harry and Hermione's direction.

After an anxious meal Dumbledore stood and walked over to the goblet of fire. After some intricate wand movements he turned to the assembled group and said, "The goblet of fire will now release the three champions."

The large cup began to spew blue flames randomly as the flames flickered a piece of parchment was ejected into the air before it fell into Dumbledore's hand and he said, "The Beauxbatons champion is Ms. Fleur Delacour." The same blonde girl that had been second out of the carriage behind Madam Maxime smiled and waved as she was led out of the great hall and into a side chamber out of sight.

The flames of the goblet flickered once again before second piece of parchment was ejected from the goblet and into the headmaster's

hand before he said, "The Durmstrang champion is Mr. Viktor Krum." A low roar of "**Krum**" came from the Durmstrang table as the stout champion nodded stiffly and was accompanied into the same chamber that Fleur had entered a moment earlier.

The Hogwarts champion was ejected a moment later before Dumbledore said, "The Hogwarts champion is Mr. Cedric Diggory." All of the houses aside from Slytherin cheered wildly for the popular student before he like the other two champions was led from the great hall into the adjoining chamber.

Dumbledore smiled and said, "Now that our three champions have been drawn, I can announce that the first task will be held November 24th. More details will be given at the appropriate ti-." However Dumbledore never finished his statement as he gaped with everyone else as the goblet of fire ejected another piece of parchment.

The old wizard paled as he read the name aloud, "The fourth champion is Mr. Harry Potter. Mr. Potter please come forward so that you may join the rest of the champions."

Harry had gripped the table so hard at the announcement that he had gotten splinters under his fingernails. Hermione roused him from his shock and appeared near tears herself as she said, "Harry, you need to go up there." Harry nodded dumbly as he stood and spared a glance over at Ron who was looking at him with such venom that Harry flinched involuntarily. Drunkenly he walked to the ministry official who opened the door to the chamber. He was too shocked to even react to the taunts and boos that rained down on him from nearly every table as he walked into the door and staggered forward until he reached the other champions.

Madam Maxime looked confused as she asked, "Do zey need us for something else young man?"

Harry blinked rapidly and was about to reply when Dumbledore and Barty Crouch stormed into the room before they stopped and Dumbledore urgently asked, "Harry how did you enter your name into the goblet?"

Harry finally took in his surroundings and said, "I swear professor I didn't enter the tournament and I have no desire to compete."

Fleur finally cottoned on to the situation and protested, "Ze is just a boy ze can not compete."

Harry nodded his agreement at the French girl who scowled in response before she turned her attention to Crouch who said, "I'm sorry Mr. Potter but your name was drawn from the goblet. It does not matter if you entered your name or not. The goblet has drawn a magical contract based upon your name, not your signature."

Harry frowned and asked, "But sir, anyone could be entered that way then."

Crouch shook his head and with a frown replied, "There were safeguards on the goblet that should have prevented this. I don't understand."

Moody stomped forward and offered, "Perhaps a powerful confundus charm could have accomplished the task."

Karkaroff, the Durmstrang headmaster, snarled as he said, "I do not care. We can not allow this."

Crouch sighed before he said, "We can not redraw because the contracts have already been made, willingly or not. The ministry will announce that Mr. Potter was forced into the competition and did not wish to be entered. He will be counted officially as an unwilling participant; so that the proper compensation can be made to Mr. Potter's estate should the worst happen."

McGonagall was aghast as she said, "Albus, there must be something we can do."

Dumbledore looked very worn as he said, "Alas there is nothing more that can be done. But, I believe Mr. Potter's entry is an indirect attempt on his life, so I shall appoint a faculty liaison to aid him in his preparations for the tasks."

Dumbledore shook his head before he turned his attention to a pale Harry and said, "I am sorry my boy, but this unfortunate happenstance must be overcome, and I have every confidence that you can do so. I will appoint Professor Moody as your liaison, so you can talk to him outside of class and work on a training schedule of some sort." Moody nodded encouragingly at Harry.

A ministry employee exclaimed, "Merlin's beard Harry Potter is in the tri-wizard tournament."

Harry glanced over at the man as Moody stomped over to Harry and muttered, "Don't worry lad, that blowhard is Ludo Bagman. He's always been a little slow on the uptake."

Cedric walked up to Harry and said, "Hey Harry, I'll make sure to tell everyone I know that you didn't enter your name. I can't imagine it looked good your name coming out so late and all."

Harry smiled weakly and said, "Um thanks Cedric." Cedric gave him a pat on the shoulder as the group separated into four distinct groups; Beauxbatons with Maxime and Fleur, Durmstrang with Krum and Karkaroff, Hogwarts with Dumbledore and Cedric, and the Unwilling participant with Harry and Moody.

Crouch finally having taken control of the situation said, "The first task is to remain a secret until it is unveiled in the champion's tent just prior to the task itself. It will be held November 24th after lunch, although I imagine none of you will be able to eat so soon before the task. Train hard and prepare for the worst."

Moody grunted as the room emptied making sure Harry stayed behind before he said, "You've got more ability and potential than anyone else in this tournament lad. I promise ya, you'll make it out of this thing alive if you pay attention and listen closely to me."

Harry nodded and he exited the room before he sullenly walked back to the Gryffindor common room, intent on trying to sleep, and unable to shake the curse of bad things happening on Halloween once again.

A/N: Ok, Ok as you all can see things are going a bit differently between Ron and Harry. Things were already strained before his

name was pulled from the goblet. Also, Harry has official aid coming from Moody this time around, although last time that didn't work out so well for him (shrugs). I hope you liked the scene with Remus and his introduction to the endearing Ms. Tonks.

Next chapter we have preparations for the first task, and a very cold period between friends is yet to come. This time Hermione won't be neutral in the war, but I'm sure you could've figured that one out already!

Thanks to all of the great reviewers, keep up the good work and with any luck and perseverance one last chapter should be out before Thanksgiving. Reviews and some love from the political science paper gods would help.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 8

“No no Potter! You need picture yourself fading into the background while you cast the disillusionment charm to maximize its effectiveness.” Moody growled as he stomped over to a half visible Harry Potter.

Moody cracked a small grin before he once again demonstrated the proper wand movement and disillusioned himself. Harry released the incomplete spell he had been under and tried it once again. Harry flicked his wand before he tapped his wand on his head and felt a cold feeling flow down his body. Upon finishing he looked down and for the first time all day, his lower body was finally disillusioned.

Moody grunted before he said, “Aye that’s the trick Potter. Now you need to keep practicing that for the first task. I managed to ask a friend at the ministry if they knew anything about it, and all they told me is that they shipped in four dragons from Romania. Dragons are adept at picking out motion and heat, so if you can trick it to see whatever you want then you’ll be able to do as you please with it. Practice those three spells and you should manage just fine. Remember Potter, CONSTANT VIGILANCE”

Harry managed a weak nod before running back to the Gryffindor common room, which since his selection had been firmly divided between those supporting Ron, and those supporting Harry and Hermione. It had been a harrowing two weeks for Harry, between training with Moody, classes, abuse from Malfoy and the other Slytherins, and a couple of sessions with Hermione on S.P.H.E.R.E and animagus protocol.

Harry walked in past the Fat Lady, who had made a point of bemoaning her little Gryffindor being forced into the ghastly tournament every time Harry exited or entered, and he immediately spotted Hermione hard at work on her Arithmancy homework. Harry sat down heavily on the floor by her feet and with an amused glance she asked, “How did the session with Professor Moody go?”

Running a hand through his unkempt hair he replied, “I learned some wicked useful charms for stealth. Apparently one of them is

something Moody himself came up with during the first war with Voldemort.”

Hermione gazed down at Harry with a piecing look before she smiled slightly and asked, “What else did he tell you Harry?”

Harry jerked his head back to Hermione before he sighed and replied, “He um, told me what I’ll be dealing with for the first task.”

Hermione frowned and asked, “But isn’t that cheating?”

Harry took his glasses off before he looked away and said, “Not if I tell the other champion’s too.”

Hermione gave Harry a shrewd smile before she asked, “How are you going to inform them?”

Harry placed his glasses back on before he gave her a lop-sided smile and said, “I figured Hedwig could drop off three letters later tonight.”

Hermione nodded before her brow furrowed and she leaned close enough to whisper, “What is the first task Harry?”

Harry leaned closer and their hot breath mingled for a moment before he whispered, “Professor Moody told me they are shipping in dragons from Romania.”

Hermione roared, “Dragons!”

Harry winced as his ears rang painfully before Hermione’s expression cleared and she looked at her friend wincing in pain before she contritely said, “Sorry about that Harry.”

Harry nodded slowly before he smiled slightly and with a twinkle in his eyes said, “Oh well I guess they all probably heard it now. I guess I won’t need to visit Hedwig after all.”

Hermione rolled her eyes before she socked Harry in the shoulder and sleepily murmured, “You look tired Harry and no History of Magic doesn’t count as nap time.”

Harry smiled sheepishly before he rose to his feet and said, "Yeah, need my beauty sleep if I have to deal with Malfoy and his insufferable pratitide."

Hermione raised an amused eyebrow before she asked, "Pratitide?"

Harry shrugged before he winked and said, "You need to get some sleep too, especially if we are going to practice everything this weekend."

Hermione nodded and then asked, "Are you going to the owlery?"

Harry nodded before he said, "Yeah, I have a couple of other letters to send out to Remus and Padfoot." Hermione merely nodded she smiled inside as Harry had been sending more letters to both men, alternating between Hedwig and school owls to make sure that his letters weren't intercepted, she for one was happy that Harry was allowing more people into his heart and life. As far as she was concerned if anyone deserved that it was Harry.

Harry grabbed some parchment and scribbled down three letters to the other champions before he checked his pocket for the letters to the Marauders. Content that everything that needed to be written down was Harry marched out of the common room and out to the owlery before curfew struck.

Harry grabbed three separate school owls and sent his letters off to the other champions before he walked over to Hedwig's roost and rubbed the feathers on her head gently before she finally nipped at his fingers affectionately. Harry smiled at his friend before he asked, "Hedwig I need you to take these letters to Remus and he can send out the other letter to Snuffles ok?"

Hedwig puffed out her feathers in a show of indignation before Harry smiled and brushed her feathers one last time before he said, "Thanks girl." Harry tied the letter to Hedwig's leg before she took off out the closest window and into the night sky towards Cambridge. The letters were short but both had noteworthy messages in them.

Moony,

Hermione was thrilled to hear that we could have a tutor this summer, although she scared me when she pulled out her study schedule for OWL's. As I mentioned in my last letter, Professor Moody has been teaching me all kinds of great defense spells for the tournament and as he calls it the war in the wings.

I am writing you to ask if you wanted to come to Hogwarts and watch the first task with Hermione in the staff and guests section. If you do send a letter to Professor Dumbledore asking for a guest pass and mention I asked for it. I'd ask Padfoot, but well you understand the issues that would cause.

Harry

Padfoot,

Yes I know, I still haven't managed to ask her, some bloody Gryffindor I am. But, I swear if I survive the first task I'll tell her. I think she kind of knows anyways, but as you said in the letter, girls still want to hear the words.

I'm working hard for the tournament and I think I am going to surprise everyone. Even if someone entered me in the tournament to kill me, I'm going to show them what happens when you mess with a Potter. You know, it's funny when I think about it. Before I met you, I never really had any idea about my parents other than my Dad playing Quidditch and that I look like my dad but have my mum's eyes. I don't know it just hurts less than it used to. I'll write you again sometime soon.

Harry

The next morning classes went by quickly and as Harry and Hermione were exiting the Charms classroom and heading down the corridor Malfoy and his two cronies rounding the other end of the corridor before he yelled out, "Hey Potter, check out this nifty new badge I got. Some Hufflepuff was handing them outside of the Transfiguration classroom."

Harry sighed and turned just to get whatever Malfoy had to show out of the way, so he could coast through the rest of the day.

Malfoy smirked he pulled out his robes around the pin and said, "You see here Potter; even if you've fooled the ministry the students still know the truth."

Harry glanced at the badge and it said *Support Cedric Diggory the Only Hogwarts Champion*. Harry turned to Hermione and shrugged not having an issue with the message before Malfoy tapped the badge with his wand and the message shifted to *Potter Stinks*.

Once again Harry shrugged and turned around to continue in the direction to the great hall. Harry had an idea his apathy would be enough to ignite Malfoy and when he heard Malfoy snarl, "*Densaugeo*."

Harry instinctively grabbed Hermione and protected her with his back as he felt the spell hit him squarely in the back. He frowned as he glanced down and could see his front teeth as they had been elongated to a comical length.

Hermione spun around and glared at Harry before she saw his teeth and with a sigh said in a strange tone, "Oh Harry, lets get you to the hospital wing. It won't do any good to report this because it is our word against his. I'm sure Madam Pomfrey can fix you up in a moment."

Upon reaching the hospital wing Hermione called out, "Madam Pomfrey, we need your help please."

A moment later the matronly head of the hospital wing bustled out of her office before she grimaced as she saw Harry and Hermione before she asked, "Oh I see you've both been hit by a spell of some sort." She eyed Harry carefully before she nodded to herself and ordered Harry to a chair before she flicked her wand and resized his teeth back to their original size. Madam Pomfrey looked at Hermione and said, "It looks like you were only glanced by the spell Ms. Granger. I assume you want it fixed just the same as Mr. Potter though?"

Hermione blinked before she nodded and sat down in a chair as Madam Pomfrey shrunk the two front teeth that had caused her nearly as much scorn in her grade school years as her bookworm

tendencies. Pleased with the final result Madam Pomfrey eyed the pair speculatively before she said, "Mr. Potter I have no doubts that you will be in my care enough the remainder of the year thanks to that ghastly tournament, perhaps you can be careful in the times between?"

Harry smiled sheepishly before he nodded and said, "I'll try Madam Pomfrey."

The older witch nodded and briskly said, "See that you do Mr. Potter."

Upon exiting the hospital wing Harry casually said, "You weren't hit by that spell Hermione."

Hermione flushed slightly but nodded and said, "I know, but it's just I know my front teeth were enormous and I couldn't pass up the chance to have them fixed."

Harry smiled slightly before he reached out and grasped Hermione's shoulders squaring her with him before he asked, "Could you smile for me?"

Hermione was startled by the question but managed a shy smile showing off her new teeth before he said, "I always thought you had a nice smile Hermione, but I have to admit it is even more beautiful now." Hermione flushed and appeared too flustered to answer as Harry smirked before turning away in walking towards the great hall intent on getting some lunch before it was too late.

After lunch they entered the potions classroom and to their satisfaction Malfoy groaned upon seeing the Gryffindor duo. Hermione made no move to show her teeth had been fixed as well, before Snape began to lecture on antidotes to certain poisons. Just as Snape made a move to flip the blackboard and reveal the potion that need be completed for class a knock on the door startled everyone.

Snape rolled his eyes heavenward before he said, "Come in."

Colin Creevy nervously poked his head into the room leaving his body behind the door as a means of protection from Snape before he

stuttered, "P-professor Snape, Harry is wanted in the headmaster's office for the weighing of the wands."

Snape scowled but nodded before he turned to Harry and said, "I want two feet on antidotes next class to make up for your missed potion Potter."

Harry sighed and grabbed his bag before he nodded to Hermione and slowly exited the classroom even catching Ron looking at him almost wistfully as he left. Harry closed the door behind him and the entire walk to the headmaster's office Harry did a quick polishing job on his wand as he thought about what the meaning of Ron's look could mean.

As Harry reached the hallway leading to the gargoyle protecting Dumbledore's office he spotted Ludo Bagman waiting for something anxiously. Harry warily walked up to the man and asked, "Mr. Bagman, are you ok?"

Bagman snapped his head towards the voice before a wide smile covered his face and he said, "Ah it is now. I was wondering if I could have a word before I accompany you to the weighing of the wands."

Harry nodded slowly as he backed up half a step and assumed a wider defensive base just as Moody had taught him. Bagman released a deep breath before he said, "I am going to be honest with you, erm Harry. I have gotten myself into a bit of trouble and I believe you might be the only one who can help me."

Harry arched his eyebrow and asked, "How is that Mr. Bagman?"

Ludo ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair before he replied, "I've fallen into a spot of debt with the goblins you see, and well to get out of it I've bet a lot of money I don't have on you winning the tournament because you are giving the best return."

Harry frowned and began to shake his head before Bagman pleaded, "I've got a unique perspective on the tournament because of my position within the ministry. I could perhaps give you an idea of what you might be facing in the first task to help guarantee my investment?"

Harry's eyes narrowed and he replied, "Mr. Bagman, I don't believe in cheating and I certainly won't cheat to support your habit. If I win, which I highly doubt, it will be on my terms without any more aid than I've already received from Professor Moody." Harry shook his head at Bagman before he walked past the gargoyle that was awaiting the completion of the party already up in the office.

Harry cautiously entered the headmaster's office and immediately he noticed the looks of gratitude the other three champions were giving him, for sharing his foreknowledge of the first task the previous night. A new strange pair of presences were a bizarre looking witch with horned glasses in a strange leopard print muggle get up and a photographer whose face was hidden behind the hood on an old style camera of some sort.

The woman immediately stormed over to Harry and grabbed at his arm but Harry pulled away leaving her grasping for air. After a moment she composed herself and with a sickly sweet smile said, "Mr. Potter, I'm Rita Skeeter for the Daily Prophet. I was wondering if I could have a word with you following the weighing of the wands and the traditional champion's photo."

Harry eyed her skeptically before he nodded and said, "Only for a couple of questions and seeing as how I have no experience with the press I request that the headmaster be present." Rita's face contorted into a very sour expression before she nodded and walked back to her photographer just as Dumbledore, Crouch, and an old man Harry remembered from his first foray onto Diagon Alley, Mr. Ollivander.

Dumbledore smiled genially at the assembled group before he said, "Ah very good, everyone has already arrived. Welcome every one to the ceremonial weighing of the wands. When Mr. Ollivander requests your wand please hand it over so he can give his official word on it."

Dumbledore gestured the champion's to four arranged chairs before Mr. Ollivander gazed at Harry and said, "Mr. Potter's wand if you please."

Harry passed his wand to Ollivander carefully and the old wizard ran his hands over the smooth holly surface before he flicked it and conjured a flute before he filled it champagne and took a sip. Nodding

to himself Ollivander vanished the flute and said, "Ah a beautifully crafted wand. It was always one of my favorites before you matched it Mr. Potter. It shall serve you well in your future endeavors." Harry nodded as he took his wand back sliding it up his sleeve and into his self made wand holster.

Krum was next and Ollivander made an offhanded remark about his dragon heartstring core, before he moved on to Fleur who had a Veela hair for her core. Cedric was last and he had a Vinewood wand with a hippogriff hair for its core. Only after Ollivander finished did Harry realize that the old wizard made no mention of the core in his wand, but realizing there was probably a reason for it Harry didn't bother to question the omission.

Upon finishing the 'weighing' Skeeter's sidekick took several different pictures of the four champions before they were dismissed. Rita stopped Harry as he went to leave before she turned to Dumbledore and said, "Headmaster would you care to watch as I interview Mr. Potter. He was understandably nervous for what will be the first of many interviews I'm sure."

Dumbledore nodded as Harry sat down in a chair in front of the headmaster's desk, and Rita sitting next to him before she pulled a quill and said, "Ok Mr. Potter, I only have a few questions for you so take your time when answering."

Harry nodded and she flicked her wand before a quill and pad of paper emerged from her handbag before she straightened her glasses and asked, "What do you think of your entry into the tri-wizard tournament?"

Harry frowned and replied, "I was unwillingly entered into the tournament and my primary concern now that I've been entered is surviving." Rita's quill wrote many more words than Harry uttered so he leaned over the pad and frowned before he shook his head and said, "I didn't say any of what your quill has taken down Ms. Skeeter. I refuse to be misquoted in order to help you sell newspapers. I mean your quill wrote down that I was crying openly as I thought of my parents and the life I missed out on because of their death."

Dumbledore's eyes were dancing with mirth as he said, "I'm afraid I have to concur with Mr. Potter, Rita. If you can not properly quote Harry, I must insist the interview come to an end."

Rita scowled before she nodded and pulled another quill and pad from her purse and said, "Could you please answer again Mr. Potter?" Harry nodded and he realized suddenly he was extremely happy that he had requested Dumbledore's presence.

The next morning the great hall was buzzing from the sensational cover story in the daily prophet.

Harry Potter: The-Boy-Who-Lived. Tragic hero or great pretender?

By: Rita Skeeter

I had the pleasure of interviewing Harry Potter after the traditional weighing of the wands for the tri-wizard tournament. Mr. Potter was very forthcoming but extremely secretive in his answers especially when dealing with his parents and his entry into the tri-wizard tournament.

Mr. Potter grew very uncomfortable when broached with questions of his parents, which I find puzzling because as an orphan one would think he would want his parents remembered for who they were. Additionally, when asked of his entry into the tri-wizard tournament Potter grew belligerent and forced Albus Dumbledore to end the questioning.

Are these the actions of the tragic hero or the actions of an attention seeking spoiled child, who has grown accustomed to getting his way even in the presence of a wizard as great as Albus Dumbledore? Only time will tell.

The next week and a half passed quickly, far too quickly for Harry's wishes as Rita Skeeter's article had brought about a very mixed bag of responses although the majority of the wizarding world still seemed to side with Harry based upon the few letters he had received. Harry had gotten a prompt response from Remus indicating he would be happy to attend the tournament and also indicated he had an additional guest he was sure Harry would be happy to see.

Noon on the 24th had come and Harry was quietly eating lunch at the Gryffindor table even though everyone else was buzzing in excitement over having no afternoon classes, and being able to watch the first task of the tri-wizard tournament. Hermione was blubbering about something, and with a rueful smile Harry understood that it had more to do with her anxiety about the task he was about to undertake than anything else.

Another interesting note was when Hermione brought it to Harry's attention that Viktor Krum had started infringing upon her territory more and more frequently as he did nothing more than watch her study and do research. Hermione had been frank as she said, "It is bloody creepy, and that's all it is Harry." This was no mean feat considering Hermione never cursed, so Harry had promised to talk to Krum about it in the champion's tent before the first task.

So many different spells and scenarios flashed through Harry's head that he took one more swig of pumpkin juice before he turned to Hermione and said, "I'm heading down to the champion's tent early. Remus should be in the guest stands soon if you want someone to talk to." Hermione jumped up and gave Harry a tight hug before sitting back down near tears as Ginny tried to console her.

As Harry exited the great hall Ron groaned as he lamented over how he was going to apologize for being a prat over the whole tournament thing. It had eventually come down to being hexed by both of the twins to force him to see reason, but not that he had seen the light he had no clue how to fix the rift he had created between himself and the other two members of the trio.

By the time Harry had reached the champion's tent and changed into his official tri-wizard champion uniform, the tent had slowly began to fill up and Harry spotted Krum alone in the opposite corner so he decided it was time to have a chat with the enigmatic Bulgarian.

"Hello Viktor." Harry said conversationally as he grabbed a chair and spun it around to sit across from the seeker.

Krum looked strangely embarrassed and he replied, "Hello Harry. Vhat can I help you vith?"

Harry frowned and replied, "My best friend Hermione said you've been watching her in the library. She admitted that it was distracting and more than a little bit creepy. She asked me to discuss this with you, and to politely ask you to stop."

Krum frowned but nodded and asked, "Is there something else you wish to tell me?"

Harry smiled slightly before he said, "See the thing is Viktor, I haven't even told Hermione this, but we have such a unique relationship that I've admitted to myself recently that I have more than a passing interest in her. She has definitely hinted her interest in me as well, so I was just asking from one bloke to another to give her some space because she deserves better than to be stared at."

Krum's shoulders sagged but he nodded resignedly and said, "Herm-ninny is very special girl va?"

Harry nodded his understanding before he took his wire rimmed glasses and replaced them with a pair of glasses Hermione charmed to match his prescription. It had been one of Harry's more pleasant surprises the previous night when Hermione had given him a pair of Oakley sunglasses that were more sturdy and reliable for the heavy contact of the tournament than his trusty wire rimmed specs.

After acclimating himself to the new glasses for a moment Harry replied, "She is special Viktor. Any bloke would be so lucky as to have someone like Hermione in their lives. If you are content with being her friend then by all means. But don't try to play games with either of us, because anyone that hurts Hermione isn't on the top of my Christmas Card List." Krum looked very confused but Harry continued, "Anyways good luck today, and Merlin willing all of us make it out of this tournament in good health."

Krum cracked a genuine smile and said, "You are good friend to Herm-ninny and excellent wizard Harry. I wish you the best of luck in the tournament." Harry smiled and reached out with his hand giving a firm handshake to Viktor before he went back to his own respective corner to wait for the next word of their task.

As Harry sat down and took deep calming breaths to prepare he heard a soft voice outside of the tent call out, "Psst Harry, are you there?"

Harry smiled and reached over to the small divider that served as an exit near his corner to reveal Hermione, who was bundled up much like she would be for a late fall Quidditch match. Hermione jumped into Harry wrapping her arms tightly around his waist and burying her face in his chest clutching at him desperately. Harry soothed her whispering soft noises into her ear, which was an interesting switch considering he was the one about to face a dragon. Finally settled down she pulled away and said, "You better not get hurt out there Harry Potter, or that dragon will be the least of your worries."

Harry put his arms on her shoulders pushing her out to arms length before he said, "I've got a plan already, and I'll tweak it to match the task. You might even see a spell or two that you taught me."

Hermione smiled weakly before she leaned in and gave Harry a quick peck on the lips before she pulled away. Her eyes lit up and she added, "Oh and Professor Lupin brought a certain grim you've made an acquaintance with. Of course everyone was trying to get him to send the grim away but Professor Lupin and the headmaster wouldn't budge."

Harry nodded and said, "Tell both of them I said thanks for showing up, and with any luck they can visit me in the medical tent after the task." Hermione nodded slowly before she gave Harry one last hug before waving as she darted back out of the tent towards the guest stands.

A few minutes after Hermione had left, the three headmasters, Moody, Ludo Bagman, and Barty Crouch entered the tent apparently to brief the tri-wizard contestants on what the first task would entail. Each of the champions formed a circle around Barty Crouch as their respective sponsors stood next to them in a show of support before Crouch pulled a bag from the pocket of his robes and said, "Champions, the first task will be a test of your magical ability and courage. In this bag we have the objects of contention for the first task. Since Mr. Potter is an unwilling participant he earns first pick in

the draw and first in the order of competitors. If you would reach in and grab one thing out of the bag Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded and reached into the bag as he felt around before he pulled out a small object and opened his palm to reveal a dragon he immediately recognized as a Chinese Fireball or more commonly known as the Liondragon. Krum went next and grimaced as he pulled out a Hungarian Horntail, which happened to be the nastiest breed of dragon known to wizards. Fleur drew a Swedish Short-Snout, which while relatively tame for dragon standards didn't appear to ease the green complexion she had been sporting since entering the tent. Cedric picked last and drew a Welsh Green, one of the native dragons to the isles.

Crouch folded the bag and placed it back into his pocket before he said, “Very well, Mr. Potter will be going first with Chinese Fireball, Ms. Delacoeur will be going second with the Swedish Short-Snout, Mr. Diggory third with the Welsh Green, and Mr. Krum will be going fourth due to the volatile nature of the horntail he has drawn.” Crouch removed his bowler hat before he continued, “Your task will be to procure a golden egg that is on the nest of the dragon you have drawn. You will be judged upon your magical skill and time required to complete the task. If you should fail to complete the task you will be awarded no points but a golden egg will be given to you. The golden egg has the clue necessary to prepare for the second task, which will be held in February. Good luck to all of the champions and may Merlin bring you to safety.”

Hermione, Remus, and Sirius in his animagus form were up in the guest/staff stands as Ludo Bagman's voice broke over the magical loud speakers installed in the stadium specially built for the first task. The man announced, “The contestant's orders and draw of their opponents for the first task have been completed. Today's task will involve each champion confronting a dragon and attempting to get a specific egg from the nest of the dragon by clever usage of magic. Mr. Potter has drawn a Chinese Fireball dragon and will be competing first. Ms. Delacoeur has drawn a Swedish Short-Snout and will be going second. Mr. Diggory has drawn a Welsh Green and will be going third. Mr. Krum has drawn a Hungarian Horntail.” The Durmstrang stands groaned collectively as Bagman continued, “and

he will be the last champion competing. Five judges have been set aside to score the competitors and the maximum score possible will be fifty.”

A moment later a voice bellowed over the loud speaker, “Dragon tenders to the field, Chinese Fireball tenders to the field.”

The Chinese Fireball was slowly dragged out onto the field constructed for the contest, and by dragon standards it appeared to be reasonably mild. Hermione understood that any dragon would be extremely fierce when protecting a nest and the fact that like its namesake the fireball released massive fireballs unlike other dragons who released streams of fire. Hermione let out a silent prayer as a nest of real dragon eggs were placed on the field and a golden egg was placed in the midst. Remus could only pat Hermione’s shoulder as he watched the young witch grow greener and greener with dread and anxiety.

Finally, Bagman’s voice once again sounded over the field as he said, “Mr. Potter please report to the field for your turn.”

A moment later Harry hesitantly walked out onto the field as he had an obstructed view of the field and he couldn’t see where the dragon had taken its place near the nest. The crowd grew silent as Harry waved his wand and perfectly cast the disillusionment charm just as Moody had taught him. His wand still visible Harry cast silencing charms on his feet as Bagman called out, “Mr. Potter is attempting to evade the dragon by using a complex combination of stealth and silencing charms.”

Harry meanwhile had gritted his teeth as he came into view of the dragon prepared to enter into the second part of his plan he alone had constructed. The task had matched his plans almost better than he had expected and managing a silent gulp that no one saw Harry conjured several blue bell flames much like the ones Hermione had conjured in her first year. Harry levitated the flames into a half circle around the area of the Fireball, which began to snort smoke as the flames agitated its reptilian vision skewed to motion and heat. The crowd had finally begun to pick up on what Harry was doing and cheers and murmurs rippled throughout the crowd.

Hermione had pressed her fingernails into her face anxiously awaiting Harry's next move, she felt a small measure of pride at using her blue bell flames as a distraction even though it was overwhelmed by her worry for Harry.

Harry conjured one last flame and floated off to the Fireball's right as finally began his movements towards the nest. Harry flicked his wand causing the flame to dance until it received the mother dragon's full attention as a threat to her eggs. Harry climbed up the mass of jangled rocks before he reached the nest and watched as the Fireball snapped its mouth at the flame barely missing it. Harry grabbed the golden egg and the crowd went crazy until the Fireball snapped its attention back at Harry finally noticing the wand slashing about controlling the flame.

Hermione gasped as the Fireball released a massive flame at Harry he finally became visible and barely avoided the brunt of the fire. Harry ran into a dead sprint despite the fact that his uniform had managed to catch fire and barely managed to dodge one last fireball as the dragon roared louder than the crowd as Harry reached the safety of the medical tent as almost everyone broke into uproarious applause at the expert job done by the youngest champion.

Ron's grimace of earlier multiplied as he realized that he never could have done anywhere near the job Harry had, despite the fact that Harry had no interest in the notoriety his performance would bring in addition to his other fame. Ron noticed movement from the staff stand as Hermione, Professor Lupin, and a grim that had left quite an impression on his leg the previous year nearly sprinted down the steps and headed off to the medical tent to check on Harry. Ron knew that now wasn't the time to talk to Harry, so he bit his tongue and ran a hand through his hair in frustration hoping that moment would come soon.

As soon as Harry and his uniform which was aflame had entered the medical tent the fire was placed out and his uniform top stripped away to treat the minor burns he had accumulated from the Fireball's only successful attack. Madam Pomfrey was applying some salve when Hermione, Remus, and Padfoot ran into the tent and marched

up to Harry looking very concerned as he winced as his burns were treated.

Hermione managed a small blush before she asked, "Harry, how are you feeling?"

Madam Pomfrey answered for him, "Ms. Granger, your friend has managed to get away with a minimal amount of damage I am happy to admit. I would be so lucky as to have similar results for the other champions."

Harry chuckled painfully before he said, "Well, that went pretty well I'd say." Hermione looked like she desperately wanted some physical reassurance that he was indeed fine so she settled for a peck on his cheek in lieu of an appropriate hugging position.

Remus smiled and said, "That was a very inventive use of the disillusionment charm Harry, it definitely is something Alastor would think of."

Harry's brow furrowed before he asked, "You know Professor Moody Pro-Remus?"

Remus smiled and said, "I worked alongside him for several months during the first war. But, I believe that is a story better told at a different time. I believe you can probably put your uniform back on so we can watch as your score is posted."

Harry nodded as he gingerly slid the magical material back onto his back as Padfoot ran up to his legs and Harry leaned down as the marauder gave him a slobbery lick to his face bringing forth a broad smile and a laugh from Harry, which warmed Remus and Hermione's hearts.

After watching Harry receive 48 out of a possible 50 (Karkaroff the Durmstrang headmaster had given Harry an 8 to go along with the others 10's) the rest of the task went considerably less event free as Fleur was severely burned on her non-wand hand, Cedric managed to have his hair catch fire and a couple of broken ribs, and Krum got off the worst as the Horntail lived up to its reputation as it handed him a broken arm and a deep gash on his side after he was struck by the

beast's barbed tail. It had come as a hug surprise to everyone when Harry was staked to a ten point lead over Krum and Cedric and a twelve point lead over Fleur after the first task. Few if any people were putting any value into Malfoy's boos and now the printed words of one Rita Skeeter.

Ron's opportunity presented itself at the conclusion of Harry's victory party for winning the first task in the Gryffindor common room. The derisive atmosphere that had existed since Harry's name had been drawn from the goblet gone in a festive show of support for Gryffindor's own personal champion.

The party had dwindled down as Hermione still was hovering protectively over Harry; daring any flirty girls to get near the boy she had staked a personal claim to long ago. Ron who had been quietly thinking in the far corner of the room finally approached the pair who eyed his cautiously before he said, "Harry, I reckon not even you're crazy enough to enter your name into the goblet." Harry didn't respond which unnerved Ron some so he continued, "I was a prat about the whole thing mate, and I'm sorry about everything before the goblet and after it."

Harry sighed and said, "Ron, I can't accept your apology until you actually figure out what you should be apologizing for. I don't hate you or anything mate, but you've broken faith with me and it will take some time and work to earn it back."

Ron's ears tinged with red in frustration at Harry's cryptic replies before he nodded and said, "I reckon you've given me plenty to think about mate. Congratulations by the way, you were brilliant mate."

As Ron walked away Harry smiled at Hermione, finally feeling some of the burden of his row with Ron lighten as they began the long path to return their friendship to its original state.

A/N: Well a lot happening this chapter and I hope you liked the diversions from canon and the completely scrambled version of the first task.

Next chapter will be up sometime next week after a weekend of working on my other stories and fattening myself on turkey and

stuffing. I imagine we'll have Ms. Rita Skeeter making her presence known much more firmly than before in the coming chapter, Ron continues down the road to redemption although there will be speed bumps along the way. We have the announcement of the Yule Ball and an unsurprising turn of events.

Thanks to all of my great reviewers and as always thanks for reading.

Chapter 9

Harry had to admit to himself in the couple of weeks following the first task that he had actually enjoyed the quiet that had surrounded him when few people openly supported his entry into the tournament. After his showing in the first task however, Harry found more 'admirers', particularly females, then even he was comfortable with. Fortunately, the disillusionment charm had a heavy work out when the packs of girls became too much, and he often retreated to the safety of the library and Hermione to find his sense of normalcy.

For whatever reason, on Thursday evening on the next to last week of term a house meeting had been called by Professor McGonagall, for the first time in any Gryffindor's memory. After some discussion by the Gryffindor fourth years, in which Lavender and Parvati admitted to hearing from members of the other houses that similar meetings were also taking place after dinner in the common rooms, the entire group piled into the common room. Harry and Hermione filling up the loveseat in the common room before anyone else could as the Ginny and Neville sat down on the ground in front of them.

Ron was off to the side messing around with the twins, the atmosphere with Harry and Hermione no longer tense and strained, but still an air of something big being unresolved lingered.

By the time the entire common room had filled with all of the Gryffindors Professor McGonagall stiffly entered the portrait hole and walked in front of the fire so she could address the entire group. Her lips were drawn into a thin line as she watched Ron and the twins mess around with toy wands but she refrained from reprimanding them instead she began to speak in an authoritative burr, "I am here to announce that there will be a Yule ball held on Christmas night." Several of the girls began to whisper furiously between each other as the boys mostly looked petrified. Ron in particular had turned a color so white that his red hair made him look quite ridiculous when contrasted.

McGonagall continued after the initial outbursts and said, "Fourth years and above are expected to attend, and third years may attend if

asked by a fourth year or older. Dress robes are required and a Hogsmeade weekend is being held this coming Saturday to accommodate anyone who hasn't gotten a dress robe or dress gown. I expect all of you to be on your best behavior and to represent Gryffindor house with pride. That is all, but if I could have a word with Mr. Potter in private it would be appreciated."

Upon hearing of the ball Harry turned to Hermione and softly asked, "Hermione?" Hermione turned her attention from McGonagall quickly masking her wistful look before Harry continued, "Would you like to go to the ball with me?"

Hermione's eyes filled with tears sending Harry into a brief state of panic before she leaned over and whispered into his ear, "I'd like that Harry."

Harry let out a relieved breath and noticed Hermione's attention was back on McGonagall and he turned to hear her mention a Hogsmeade weekend to do any additional shopping for the ball, and something about third years being able to attend with an older date. Then she specifically asked for him and he winced wondering what new nonsense he was being singled out for. The common room slowly emptied and Hermione went over to the other side of the room with her book bag in hand to do some homework no doubt.

McGonagall finally pulled Harry into a corner before she said, "First, I'd like to say how proud I was of you for your performance in the first task of the tournament. A very Slytherin touch to some Gryffindor bravado worked quite nicely." Harry smiled slightly although he was rather confused by why she had needed him alone to say this until she continued, "As for the matter why I wanted to talk to you in private, Mr. Potter." Harry nodded and she managed a quick twitchy looking smile before she said, "As a champion you are expected to join in the ceremonial first dance of the ball. It will be a simple waltz. Do you have a date in mind yet?"

Harry's eyes swiveled around before he leaned in and said, "I already asked Hermione and she said yes."

McGonagall's eyes twinkled as her expression softened and she said, "Very well Mr. Potter. I will inform the necessary officials. If I might

add, I believe you and Ms. Granger make a lovely pair.” Harry smiled and nodded as McGonagall left the room with an uncharacteristic bounce in her step.

Harry walked back to Hermione and took his usual place near her feet before he said, “We have to join a ceremonial first dance for the ball.”

Hermione bit her lip before she glanced around the common room and said, “We can skip our training Saturday night and I’ll teach you the few dance steps that I know. I imagine it won’t be much more than waltz of some sort.” Harry nodded as Hermione apprehensively added, “Harry, I don’t think we should tell anyone who we’re going with. It will only cause more problems.”

Harry frowned and asked, “A-are you ashamed of me or something?”

Hermione sighed and whispered, “Harry, there are a lot of girls who want to go to the ball with you. I imagine if they found out I was going with you, my life would be pretty miserable for the next couple of weeks.”

Harry ran an agitated hand through his hair before he nodded and lapsed into thought for a very long moment. Finally he smiled and said, “You wouldn’t believe how happy I am to be going to the ball with you.” Hermione merely smiled as Harry stood and gave her a quick hug before retreating to the boy’s dormitory to play a game of gobstones with someone before going to bed. Even Hermione had to admit that Harry deserved a night off from all of the extra work.

By Saturday morning Harry suddenly began to feel more and more glad that he had asked Hermione to the ball quickly, because he was having a hard time not laughing at all of the insecure guys desperate to find a date to the ball. Of course, Harry could certainly empathize girls could be very scary in the proper situations.

To Harry’s surprise Hermione had been asked to the ball by Neville, even though Harry thought it was more out of respect for her than anything else. The real surprise for Harry came when he had been cornered by a pack of fifteen girls all demanding to be his date,

before he was saved by Fred and George as the twin pranksters assaulted the rabid girls with dung bombs until they let Harry go.

Saturday morning found Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny who Neville had asked to the ball once Harry promised him protection from all of the Weasley brothers. Harry turned to Hermione and asked, "Is there anything specific you need?"

Hermione shook her head before she smiled and said, "No, but I need to take you to Gladrags and get you an undershirt that matches my gown. If we get there first then we won't have to wait in line just for shirt."

Harry nodded slightly amused by Hermione's actions, but keeping his expression carefully neutral not to bring forth the wrath of Hermione by being a stupid git for not understanding her reasons. Harry had owed Remus the prior night for a simple request with the necessary galleons to get Hermione something nice for the ball. He had done his Christmas shopping by owl order after the first task, so that was actually one concern he no longer had to deal with.

As luck had it they managed to be second on line at Gladrags and Hermione immediately found a white shirt with periwinkle trim which would go quite nicely with her dress and his dress robes. Hermione wanted to go to the bookstore and Harry smiled and said, "I'll be there in a minute I need to pick something else up."

Immediately Harry found the object of his search at Dervish & Banges as he picked up a miniature foe glass that fit into his wallet. Moody suggested a full sized one but it wasn't terribly realistic, and frankly Harry wasn't as paranoid as the old auror. Caution and paranoia were related, but they were only related distantly as far as Harry was concerned.

Harry paid for the miniature foe glass and tucked it into his wallet taking a quick glance and seeing no one visible he put his wallet away and walked towards the bookstore to find out what Hermione was doing. Harry found her in a far corner with a large stack of books and called out, "Hermione."

Hermione frantically looked around before she unlatched her cloak and covered her stack of books, which were apparently Christmas presents. Harry smiled and raised his hands in a placating gesture before he said, "Relax, I won't sneak a peak. Do you want me to carry those for you? At least until I put them on the counter, then I promise I'll wait outside for you."

Hermione pierced Harry with a look he really had never seen from her before, but if he had to describe, it would be skepticism mixed with a look filled with a strange intensity that honestly scared him a little bit. By the time they were back on the carriages heading back to the castle, the look had softened some, but the skepticism from earlier had been replaced by something softer and more inviting. Whatever it was, Harry had a strong feeling he would be seeing it more at the Yule ball in a couple of weeks.

At nearly two in the morning several hours after the return from Hogsmeade, Harry was wearing his silk pajamas as he glanced at the fire blankly, when the soft patter of footsteps alerted him to the presence of his dance instructor. Hermione was also wearing her pajamas, although her fluffy pink slippers were a sharp contrast to Harry's plain slippers.

Hermione smiled and quietly said, "I imagine the only formal dance at the ball is the first one, and then we can sway the rest of the night when we dance."

Harry nodded and she continued, "Usually the first dance at formal situations is a waltz of some sort. I'll teach you a formal waltz so that I can save my feet and we can both look like we're in the right place."

Harry nodded as Hermione instructed, "The biggest key to dancing is smooth movements Harry. The waltz is a rather simple dance unless you attempt to complicate it." The next two hours the two Gryffindors learned to dance in the firelight, in what could easily be described the most romantic night of either of their lives, although neither would admit to as much for a couple of months at the soonest.

Sunday afternoon found Harry up in the library, for once alone as he was putting the finishing touches on his last potions essay of the term.

It came as quite a surprise when Viktor Krum approached the back table that Harry and Hermione had taken residence at all year.

"Harry may I haff a vord?" Krum quietly said to prevent attracting any more attention than two of the most famous wizards in the school could. For once the Bulgarian seeker wasn't being sought by his adoring fans.

Harry glanced up from his book and motioned to a seat before he marked his page and said, "What can I help you with Viktor?"

Viktor glanced around warily before he said, "You haff not solved the riddle of the egg yet yes?"

Harry nodded pensively and Viktor leaned in close before he said, "You must listen to it undervater to get the message."

Harry blinked in surprise before he asked, "W-why are you telling me this?"

Viktor stood from his seat before he fixed Harry with a queer look and said, "You told us of the dragons and now I haff helped you. I very much vish for a fair tournament too, yes?" Harry smiled and nodded as Viktor walked behind a stack and disappeared from sight.

Once Viktor was gone, the immediacy of the tournament seemed to press down more heavily than before on Harry as he realized that while the previous three weeks had been amazing, he still needed to refocus himself on the task at hand and get back to training. The first step would be talking to Professor Moody and trying to arrange some time alone in some water that wasn't the frigid depths of the great lake.

Harry put the finishing touches on his two feet before he rolled it up and took care of his books and supplies. A moment later, his bag was hoisted over his shoulder as he took off in pursuit of Moody and a possible means of listening to his egg underwater as Viktor had recommended.

Harry knocked on Moody's office door and a moment later the door swung open as Professor Moody looked at Harry for a moment before he asked, "What do ya want Potter?"

Harry sighed and asked, "I think I've figured out the first part of the egg, but I need somewhere with a bath tub to figure out the rest of it. Could you help me?"

Moody's eye swiveled around madly before he stomped back into his office leaving the door cracked open enough to watch the ex-auror rummage around a pile of papers for a long moment before he stomped back and said, "You know where the prefect's bathroom is?"

Harry nodded slowly and Moody continued, "The password is *pinefresh* for the prefect's bathroom for Gryffindor house. Make sure you go when no one else is, because I really don't want to explain your presence to Albus."

The following days went by quickly as Harry shelved the riddle of the egg until after the holiday season and all it would bring. The Friday, one week before Christmas, had come and with it the final day of the term. Harry continued to grin and gently turn down all girls that basically begged him to go to the ball with the standard, "I already have a date, and we both agreed not to spread it around who are date is." It was quite amazing Harry had to admit, that no one had noticed just how much closer he was with Hermione this year. But, then he mused that he never paid attention to how close they were in the past, at least in appearance, before the summer and it was entirely possible things hadn't shifted as much as he felt they had.

After dinner everyone had piled into their respective corners of the common room and were relaxing when Ron and a few third year Gryffindor girls walked into the room. Ron's face was so pale he looked near death and a few of the girls looked so sympathetic it was in fact almost pathetic.

Ginny, Harry, and Hermione ran over to him and his sister asked, "Ron what's the matter?"

Ron blinked and swallowed heavily before he answered, "I-I still need a date for the ball, and when I saw Fleur and her friends something in

my head told me 'Hey Ron you should ask Fleur'. I walked over to her and I asked her. All I remember after that was someone laughing and now I'm here."

One of the girls Ginny identified as Gretchen said, "That stupid French bint could have been nice at least. No, instead she had to laugh at him and draw attention to the poor boy."

Harry's concern for Ron overrode his current disagreement with his friend as he said, "Listen mate, there is more to a girl than looks. From what I can tell Fleur has been relying on her looks for so long she doesn't have much in terms of personality. You just need to find a nice girl with some personality."

Ron blinked and nodded before his eyes traveled over to Hermione and like a light bulb had been turned on, "Hermione! You're a girl."

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she spat, "Took you three and a half years to figure that one out."

Ron smiled in an attempt to calm her which only fanned the flames of her anger before he said, "No! I mean, of course you're a girl. But, you know maybe you could go with me to the ball."

Harry had to look away to conceal his eye roll, Ron really could be dense sometimes, before he turned back to Hermione whose expression had lightened before she defiantly said, "I have a date already if you must know."

Ron snorted and said, "I heard you say that to Neville too, but you can do a lot worse than me so why try the same lie."

Harry coughed to cover his amusement at the statement as Hermione tensed and said, "Ronald, I suggest you shut that hole in your face that you use for eating, and at the moment, defecating the English language from. I have a date and I wouldn't go with you even if I didn't have a date."

Ron turned to Harry and upon seeing the arched eyebrow on his face realized no help was available at that quarter so he frowned and said, "Fine then, don't go to the ball with a date. I was just trying to do you

a favor anyways. I'm sure there are plenty of girls that look a fair bit better and are still available anyways."

Hermione's hand twitched to her wand and she was about to end the conversation the hard way before Harry beat her to it and softly but commandingly said, "Ron, I swear to god you are going to apologize for being rude right now or you'll find that your bum works as another holster for your wand."

Ron growled but did concede the point as he gruffly said, "I'm sorry Hermione; I didn't mean it. I'm just being a prat."

Ron turned his attention to Harry once again and challengingly said, "What about you Harry? Found a date yet?"

Harry smirked and swiftly replied, "As a matter of a fact I've had a date since the night the ball was announced. She also happens to be the prettiest witch on the grounds." Ron didn't notice Hermione's beaming smile towards Harry.

After a moment to let Harry's statement sink in Ron looked a mixture of disbelieving and envious for a moment before he unthinkingly said, "Well some of us aren't lucky enough to have girls after our fame."

Harry looked at Ron with sympathy for a moment before he softly replied, "A friendship is a terrible thing to waste on jealousy and bitterness Ron. Remember that." Ron managed to look ashamed as Harry sighed heavily, and walked out of the portrait hole. Hermione glared at Ron for a few minutes before she bolted as well, in pursuit of Harry to calm him down.

Saturday morning the great hall was buzzing as another Rita Skeeter article on Harry graced the pages of the Daily Prophet. Harry managed to grab Hermione's copy of the paper first as he paid for the edition and frowned as he read down the article. Hermione looked concerned as whispers and a few titters from the Slytherin table cascaded through the student populace. A few witches even began to glare at Hermione who grabbed the paper and read:

Two Champions Vie for A Very Different Prize

By: Rita Skeeter

More news has come from Hogwarts and this reporter has managed to secure the truth just as you the readers deserve. It has come to my attention thanks to various sources that Muggleborn student Hermione Granger has managed to ensnare the attention of not one but two wizards, Viktor Krum “The Bulgarian Bon-Bon”, and Harry Potter “The Boy who became a hunk”.

So, I decided to dig deeper in an attempt to find out more about Ms. Granger to find out what she has that so many other deserving witches lack. What I found disturbed me greatly.

Pansy Parkinson a fellow 4th year student said, “She’s really ugly and brainy, the only way she could have gotten Potter and Krum is if she used love potions.”

Draco Malfoy another 4th year added, “It’s not like Potter and Krum are all that bright, so I wouldn’t be surprised if she did use the potions.”

If there is truth to these serious accusations from two pureblooded students of the highest pedigree, then what kind of message is being sent to all of those witches and wizards who seek love? When in doubt use a love potion? This reporter only hopes that the “Scarlet woman” is stopped before the two great young wizards are damaged too badly.

I personally was privy to a conversation where the potion addled wizards threatened each other before the first task of the tri-wizard tournament. In the end it was Potter who appeared to won the battle, but will he win the war? In the end does it even matter?

Only Albus Dumbledore can stop this outrage and break the spell this wicked little witch has successfully cast. The only question is, will he do it?

While several students laughed at the ridiculous article, several others appeared to buy the garbage and glared at Hermione as she

finished her breakfast. Harry meanwhile was heavy in thought trying to figure out how Rita had overheard his conversation with Viktor before the first task. There hadn't been anyone else in the tent that could have heard them, so either she used a spying spell of some sort, or she managed to get into the tent unseen. Either way, Harry was going to figure out the secret of Rita Skeeter and make her pay.

One of the downsides of magic was the amazing speed at which word spread considering everything was delivered by owl. Ten different owls entered the hall with howlers and took off straight at Hermione apparently prepared to give her a piece of someone's mind. Harry pulled his wand and as the owls dropped the letter Harry silently obliterated nine of the ten letters before they had a chance to activate. The last letter opened and before Harry could obliterate it a familiar voice echoed through the hall as Molly Weasley screeched nay howled,

"Hermione Granger you should be ashamed of yourself. Using love potions is not a thing any proper lady should use and on sweet Harry no less. You truly are a scarlet woman, and I'm sure your parents would be ashamed."

Harry frowned and obliterated the howler before it could do any more damage before he glanced over at Hermione, whose eyes had filled with tears at the public reprimand from the matronly witch who had been so kind to her in the past. Harry angrily muttered, "What a load of rubbish. Molly is going to hear from me after this. She is definitely off of the Christmas card list."

Harry's comments earned a tearful giggle from Hermione, for which he was eternally grateful for before he turned to Ginny whose eyes were wide from her mother's comments before she caught Harry's gaze and nodded as she took off to write a letter to her mother explaining the situation.

It hadn't surprised Harry when Hermione had told him that she had told Ginny of their coming date at the Yule ball, and unlike anyone else save Harry and Hermione she had been watching their behavior over the course of the summer and then fall term as they slowly grew closer and more well, like a couple. Perhaps the most infuriating thing

Ginny found was that her mother had used love potions sparingly to get her father to date her in the first place. So, everything she said was not only false and purposely hurtful, but also hypocritical in the worst possible way.

The next morning found things settling down within the school, after Dumbledore had made an announcement that no love potions were being used on students at Hogwarts. Harry had gotten a late start on the morning when he plopped down heavily at the Gryffindor table next to Hermione. He grimaced at the stack of letters sitting in front of her at the table before he asked, "Um, no howlers today?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "No howlers, but the headmaster told me yesterday to check my mail for jinxes. Let me show you the detection spell and then you can help me check my mail. Most of the letters are rather funny actually."

After Hermione taught him the reasonably simple spell, Harry grabbed a plate of toast and about half of her stack of letters as he slowly worked through the letters. Harry did have to admit that most of the letters were rather funny going on about scarlet women, but he did notice the discrimination against a muggleborn doing it in the first place; Almost as if it was acceptable for half bloods, full bloods, or even purebloods to do the very same.

Harry was reaching the end of his stack as he sipped on a mug of hot cocoa and waved his wand over the next letter. Hermione had found two letters jinxed with some rather nasty curses when she heard Harry groan in pain and she glanced over to see Harry's hands billowing off a thick mist for a moment. As the mist cleared Hermione spotted several painful looking boils covering his hands and it nearly broke her heart when she realized that he had been hurt helping her.

Harry's hands were shaking slightly as he slowly stood from the table and glanced at Dumbledore swiftly but the message had been sent. All of the inquiring eyes of the hall were watching the boy-who-lived in obvious discomfort hands covered in undiluted bubotuber pus and the boils and sores that come with it. Dumbledore quickly stood and said, "Ms. Granger please accompany Mr. Potter to the hospital wing so

his hands can be tended to. As to the rest of you, please finish your breakfast and enjoy your days off before the holidays.”

As Harry’s hands were being tended to in the hospital wing Dumbledore walked in with a smile on his face before he walked over to Harry, Hermione and Madam Pomfrey and said, “The house elves will be checking any further letters to Ms. Granger for hexes of harmful properties. I will personally contact the offices of the Daily Prophet and demand a retraction of Ms. Skeeter’s article with a public apology to all parties involved.”

By Monday and thanks to the healing prowess of Madam Pomfrey, Harry and his hands were given a clean bill of health. Most of the younger students were on their way to Hogsmeade to catch the express back to King’s Cross when Harry decided to get the clue of the egg solved.

Harry approached the portrait entrance to the prefect’s bathroom with a towel and swim trunks in tow to accomplish his task. Harry uttered, “*Pinefresh*” and entered the empty prefect’s bathroom. Harry glanced around and slid a bench in front of the opening just in case. After quickly changing into his swim trunks Harry grabbed the large golden egg and jumped into one of the enchanted ever full tubs. Harry pressed a lever next to where he was sitting as the tub slowly filled with bubbled to protect his modesty in case someone did come in.

Harry cracked open the egg underwater and quickly submerged to listen to the message. The lilting almost ethereal voices sang,

Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above ground,

And while you’re searching, ponder this:

We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss,

An hour long you’ll have to look,

And to recover what we took,

But past an hour—the prospect's block,

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back

Harry surfaced as he repeated the song to himself over and over, trying to commit it to memory, completely oblivious to the fact that someone or something had joined him while underwater. After repeating the song for the tenth time he felt a cold chill run down his spine, which he only felt when in the presence of a ghost. Steeling himself and hoping desperately for Sir Nicholas, he was surprised to see Moaning Myrtle pop up out of the water directly in front of him. Based on her proximity Harry was certain she had gotten well, the full show thanks to his baggy swim trunks, and so he said, "Hello Myrtle, can I help you with something?"

Myrtle popped fully out of the water giggling before she said, "Oh no Harry, you've helped me enough today as it is. Of course that strange singing in the tub is a might distracting."

Harry rolled his eyes and dryly said, "Oh have experience with that, do we?"

Myrtle giggled and blew a raspberry at Harry before she said, "Only with that cute Cedric Diggory. He was in yesterday doing the same thing you did today. I got him parchment and a quill to write with, would you like the same? After all it is the least I can do."

Harry arched an eyebrow but nodded as Myrtle floated away to the far corner of the bathroom before returning with a parchment and quill. Harry's eyes narrowed and he asked, "I thought ghosts couldn't affect the physical world?"

Myrtle smiled and said, "Ghosts are magical silly boy, we can affect magical things just fine. Why else do you think there are so many of us at Hogwarts? The magic of the school keeps us from sinking into the ground. "

Harry nodded as he quickly jotted the song down onto the parchment before he stood and turned the bubbles off. Stepping out of the tub he grabbed his towel and dried himself off before changing back into his other clothes. An ethereal giggle indicated Myrtle got the rest of the

show if she had missed it earlier, and he grabbed the parchment before he said, "Thanks Myrtle, you pervert." Harry put the bench back in its normal place before walking out of the portrait hole with a rueful grin on his face. Myrtle giggled and flew up through the ceiling of the room back to her normal bathroom.

A/N: My oh my it's been a bit hasn't it? Well it could be worse I've been working through the next chapter of one of my other series and have managed a third of a chapter in a month. It stinks when I get busy!

Next chapter we have some pre-Christmas stuff, a Dobby and Winky meet and greet to go along with some house elf history, and yes Christmas morning and the Yule Ball!

I hope all of you had a happy thanksgiving. Thanks for reading and thanks for the reviews.

Chapter 10

If there was one thing Harry admired about Mad-Eye Moody, it was that he didn't bother with pleasantries or chit-chat like so many of his other professors had in the past. Even that wasn't a entirely fair description of Moody though. To give it some perspective, the two times they met for dueling club Moody had personally stunned students not paying attention to prove a point. Of course it had been Malfoy and Ernie McMillan, and they were having an arrogant vs. pompous git-off of some sort, during Moody's instruction. But Harry was certain no other professor would have reacted as such. Moody had even threatened to transfigure Malfoy into a ferret or some other kind of Weasel, because that was what Malfoy's were, Weasels.

Two days before Christmas and the Yule Ball, Harry was standing in the middle of the defense classroom. Although unlike during the term the room had been transformed into what appeared to be one large dueling room with a large mat in the center. Harry had shown Moody the clue and after some discussion Moody taught Harry the bubblehead charm, although even Moody admitted there were better solutions to being underwater, it was nonetheless, a starting point.

However, the majority of their training time was spent learning several of the tricks Moody himself had employed in his years as the most tenacious auror in the ministry. He taught Harry jinxes that were just on the safe side of dark arts, such as the piercing jinx *percrutio*, a rather nasty cutting curse *abrumpto*, and an exploding hex *perfringo*. These were the spells that he had used more in the hunting of dark wizards and deatheaters than anything else.

It had chilled Harry to the bone when the grizzled man said, "If you don't put them out of commission lad, they'll put you out first." Of course the manic laugh that followed certainly didn't help matters, as Harry was dismissed from training until after New Years.

It was an exhausted Harry Potter that walked into the Gryffindor common room dragging his feet as he desperately wanted to find a nice deep hole to take a nap in. Most of the students remaining at the school were scattered throughout the various rooms of the castle

leaving the common room sparsely populated with Hermione, Neville, and Ginny the only ones there.

Hermione glanced up from the newest issue of teen witch weekly that somehow had a picture of Harry posing on the cover and she softly asked, "Alright there Harry?"

Harry blearily blinked before he hobbled over to the nearest chair before sitting down heavily and let out a deep breath before he replied, "Yeah, just tired. But, on the bright side, no more training until after New Years."

Hermione smiled and was about to reply when Ron, who frankly wasn't in many people's good book at the moment, nearly sprinted into the common room and said to no one in particular, "Guess who has a date?"

Ginny, having grown up in a house full of boys replied, "Rosy Palms doesn't count as a date Ron."

This drew a painful sounding laugh from Harry as Neville quietly chuckled and Hermione fought a grin all the while trying to hold a reproachful look on her face. Ron however was in too jubilant of a mood to care as he excitedly said, "I'm going with Padma Patil."

Harry actually managed a small smile and said, "Good for you mate. Now you just need to worry about your robes, right?"

Ron's grin melted off of his face as a panicked expression took its place and Harry continued, in order to stem the tide and said, "I bought you a plain set of dress robes if you want them."

Ron's face shifted to a jumbled mass of emotions as Harry finished, "If you promise to pay them off before my birthday then you can have them."

After a long moment Ron nodded slowly with a slight frown before he said, "Harry, not that I'm complaining, but why are you doing this for me?"

Harry rubbed at his sore shoulder for a moment before he answered, "You're still my friend Ron, even if you've been quite the prat this year. Anyways, it's not like I'm giving the robes to you. You have to pay them off by my birthday."

Ron's frown took on a sad quality and he was about to thank Harry when his raven haired friend beat him to the punch, "You can tell me thanks when you figure out the apology thing."

Ron's mouth shut with an audible click as he looked at Harry for a few seconds before he nodded and walked up the stairs to the fourth year boy's dormitory.

Hermione was first to speak as she quietly said, "You're doing a good thing Harry."

Harry smiled slightly as he began to stand before he said, "I need to take a nice long hot shower and then there is something I'd like to show you." Hermione arched an eyebrow as Harry limped up the stairs. Hermione then turned to Ginny to ask her to guess on Harry's surprise and instead rolled her eyes at the diminutive witch, who was wagging her eyebrows like crazy with innuendo, before they both burst into giggles; leaving an extremely confused Neville shaking his head at their antics and hoping Harry would come soon to separate them.

It was nearly an hour later when an energized Harry walked down the stairs and found the common room slightly fuller than he had left it. Lavender, Parvati, and the other fourth year Gryffindor girl Serene Rookwood were animatedly discussing something in the opposite corner, as the three he had left behind were just as he had left them. Harry was dressed in a t-shirt and jumper to combat the drafty castle as he walked up to Hermione with a twinkle in his eyes before he asked, "Ready for a little surprise?"

Hermione swiveled her head to Harry and asked, "This is something my father would approve of?"

Harry's eyes widened as he blushed before he stammered, "O-of course it is. What kind of bloke do you take me for?"

Hermione smiled sweetly before she turned to Ginny and asked, "Can you take care of my book for me Gin?" Ginny smiled and nodded before going back into discussion with Neville. Hermione stood and stretched her legs before she said, "Ok Mr. Potter lead the way."

Harry took Hermione's hand as they slowly took the staircases down to the first floor before entering the great hall. Hermione looked around the hall and asked, "You wanted to show me the great hall?"

Harry merely smiled and shook his head before he said, "Come on down this corridor here." Hermione had a very inquisitive look on her face as they went down a corridor on the right of the great hall. They reached a giant tapestry of fruit and with a smirk Harry tickled the pear and the portrait slid aside leading to a spiral staircase.

Hermione's interest was no peaked and she asked, "Where are we going Harry?"

Harry smiled and spoke as they took the steps down the spiral staircase, "I thought you might like a chance to get some first hand thoughts on S.P.H.E.R.E."

The staircase finally ended as it led to another corridor heading back in the direction of the corridor that led them to the other tapestry although a floor below. Two massive doors much like the ones guarding the great hall were cracked open and with a flick of Harry's wand, the doors opened revealing dozens of house elves scurrying about either making food or making the ingredients for the food.

Hermione gasped in shock at the sheer number of elves and was about to protest when a familiar elf popped up in front of them and briefly hugged their legs before he squealed, "Oh Master Harry Potter and Missus Grangey. Dobby is so happy to see you."

Harry smiled slightly at his small friend before he pried the little elf from his legs and said, "Hermione and I thought we'd come by for a visit. Is Winky about?"

Dobby tugged on his ears nervously and said, "Winky is still being sad about being free elf like Dobby. Dobby will go get her and make her presentable." Dobby snapped his fingers and a table with four

chairs materialized before he said, "Master Harry and Missus Grangey can sit here while Dobby is gone."

A moment later the little elf Harry remembered from the Quidditch World Cup returned with Dobby. She looked terrible and sat down with a bottle of butterbeer in her tiny hands. Dobby helped Winky into a seat before he sat in his own little chair and twisted his school uniform in his hands. Harry frowned before he glanced over at Hermione and then turned back to Dobby and asked, "Dobby could you tell us why house elves are enslaved?"

Dobby looked over to Winky who let loose a hiccup before he replied, "Dobby's sire told Dobby when he was a little elfling, that house elves were originally familiars of goblins. But Dobby knows that the goblins lost a war against the wizards and gave up all of the house elves to the wizards. Ever since Dobby knows elves need to bond to wizards or theirs magic goes away and we die."

Harry frowned and asked, "So how are you and Winky managing then?"

Dobby looked up with wide eyes and said, "Dobby is bonded with Master Harry Potter sir when he is being freed from old masters. Dobby is always watching Master Harry and waiting to be called. That's why Dobby gets job at Hogwarts. Dobby even gets one Knut a month for his work. Dobby is very proud to bes working for money."

Harry was floored and managed to sputter, "So you're bonded to me then, Dobby?"

Dobby nodded excitedly and said, "Dobby is thinking Master Harry Potter is a great wizard." Then his ears drooped and he said, "But, Winky she be losing her magic soon if she not bonded."

Hermione had been strangely silent for a long time before she spoke, "Dobby, why do house elves need to be bonded to someone to keep their magic?"

Dobby twisted his hands and said, "Elves always be needing a bond, because we can't use our magics without a bond. Bond with wizards is like a key to our magic."

Hermione sighed heavily before she turned to Winky and said, "Winky, I'll allow you to be bonded to me if you continue to work here at Hogwarts and accept a salary like Dobby. I'm sure Harry and I could use both of your help in the future. But, we need to make a few things clear and since Harry wasn't even aware he was bonded to Dobby we need to set some ground rules."

Winky had perked up considerably at Hermione's statement and even vanished her butterbeer before Hermione continued, "I think that during the school year you both should work here at Hogwarts and save some money. Harry and I will pay you for your time during the summers and after school. Your salary will be negotiable but it will be consistent to erm, a servant." Hermione frowned in thought and added, "Now, I don't know how the underage magic laws work with elves..."

Winky spoke for the first time that night as she said, "Elves magic can be invisible when we want it to be. Winky be hearing about Dobby using wizards magic to get Harry Potter in troubles." Winky had rounded on Dobby whose ears were drooping with each word.

Harry finally gained a handle on the situation and said, "Ok Winky, but Dobby wasn't bonded to me at the time, so he was helping me the only way he could. If you both agree to Hermione's stipulations I have one more thing I'd like to add." Hermione and the two elves looked at him expectantly and he said, "I know Dobby always wanted to punish himself in our second year and all I ask, is that if you do something you know is bad you come to us before you try to punish yourself. We can talk about punishments and if one is even warranted it won't be physical punishment. Lots of jobs dock pay if someone messed up really badly so we can probably do something similar here."

Dobby and Winky shared a hopeful look before Hermione said, "Ok then Winky, we can bond if you want to." Winky squealed and walked over to Hermione before placing one of her tiny hands on Hermione's.

A moment later Winky pulled away and nodded, already looking much happier than she was a few minutes earlier before she said,

“Mistress Hermione and Winky is bonded now. If Mistress ever be wanting anything all she need be doing is calling Winky.”

Dobby nodded and looked at Harry before he said, “Dobby is saying same to Master Harry.”

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair before he said, “Well, this isn’t exactly what I had planned for tonight.”

Hermione smiled at Harry understanding what his plans had been and she said, “It’s ok Harry, like they told us. A bonding is like having another familiar that’s all, and just think of all they can teach us about house elves in order help the other elves in the future.”

Harry smiled slightly before he turned to Dobby and Winky and said, “Well, I’m glad we figured all of this out now.’ He turned to Winky and said, “I think Hermione and I can both agree that you shouldn’t be drinking any more Winky.” Winky nodded solemnly eliciting a small laugh from Harry before he stood and said, “Ok Dobby, Winky, Hermione and I should really be going. Thanks for all of your help though.”

Hermione stood a moment later and Dobby snapped his fingers causing the table to vanish once again before she said, “I should like to talk to the both of you more over the holidays. I would like to research more about how your magic works so that maybe someday in the future elves won’t need to bond to keep their magic.” Dobby and Winky looked at Hermione queerly but nodded as they escorted their masters to the door before closing it behind them.

Christmas Eve the castle was abuzz with holiday cheer as even Ron was included in the usual festivities of a snowball fight outside followed quickly by hot cocoa by the fire in the Gryffindor common room. The Durmstrang ship was resplendent in red and green magical lights and the Beauxbaton’s carriage was wrapped in tinsel and surrounded by fairies.

Harry was surprised when an owl flew right into a small window in the common room and dropped a reasonably small package into his lap. The package was wrapped in Gryffindor house paper and a small card was on the top.

Harry opened the card and read:

Harry,

As you already know, Snuffles has taken residence at my cottage for the time being until something more permanent can be arranged. I've been working some back channels to Dumbledore and we think we might have something set up by the summer. Anyways, we visited one prospective location in London and happened upon something that you'll find very handy for a Christmas present.

Inside is a pocket mirror that works as a communication mirror with those mirrors charmed to it. Your father, Paddy, and I all had one of these mirrors and what you hold now is your father's. By some quirk of fate I managed to find mine in an old school trunk the day after, so if you want to talk to either of us say either our real name or our marauder name and we should pick up. Since you are at school you can decide when to call us. We hope to hear from you soon.

Messrs. Moony and Padfoot

Harry glanced around only to find most of the full common room looking at him, so he opted against opening right away, but later when he would be assured some privacy. Hermione looked over his arm at the card before she smiled and whispered, "Christmas present?"

Harry nodded before he replied, "I sent out their gifts last night with Hedwig, so they should have them by some time tonight."

Hermione gestured with her hand and Harry handed her the card, which she read in a few seconds before saying, "Sounds like a very useful gift." Harry smiled and nodded before he tucked the still wrapped gift into a pocket on his jacket and relaxing on the couch as Hermione leaned into his shoulder as she was akin to. They sat in silence as watched the fire flicker and cast a shadow of the Christmas tree stationed in the room up against the far wall. It was one of those moments that no one ever really wanted to end.

Harry awoke Christmas morning to something tugging on his blanket insistently in a sure attempt to wake him up and get his attention.

Harry blindly grabbed his glasses from the nightstand and placed them on before he finally opened his eyes blearily and scanned around him for the perpetrator. Standing right next to him with a small package wrapped in snitch covered wrapping paper, Dobby looked at Harry with his large black eyes and quietly, but definitely excitedly said, "Merry Christmas Master Harry."

Harry blinked once before he took the small present and unwrapped it to reveal one purple sock with enchanted snitches fluttering around and the other the same except in orange. Harry had to admit it was the brightest pair of socks he owned and accepted them with a grateful nod. Thankful that he had bought a few "reserve" presents in case he was gifted by someone he hadn't expected Harry stumbled out of his bed before walking over to his trunk and unlocking it. After rummaging for a couple of minutes he emerged with a small gift of his own for Dobby.

Harry handed Dobby the gift and said, "I used owl order for my gifts this year so what you have is my inventive solution to not being able to give you clothes."

Dobby's eyes widened at the mention of clothes but relaxed when Harry talked about a solution to that problem. Opening the gift much like Harry had opened his first gift ever three years ago during Christmas Dobby revealed a small catalog titled Hats of the Quidditch Premiere League.

Harry smiled and said, "That catalog has already been credited for one hat so all you need to do is mark your selection down and you'll receive your hat via owl in a day or two."

Dobby's eyes filled with tears before he hugged Harry's legs tightly and whispered, "Oh Dobby is being so happy about his gift. Master Harry is a great wizard and Dobby is wishing him a Merry Christmas."

Harry smiled as he his feet slid into his slippers before he said, "Merry Christmas Dobby and give Winky my best also." Dobby nodded emphatically before he vanished with a quiet pop.

Harry chuckled for a moment at the exuberant elf before he grabbed his other presents and quietly walked down the stairs to wait for

everyone else to wake up and join him. With a flash of inspiration Harry grabbed his mirror, fully intending on giving his Christmas wishes to the elder Marauders.

Harry reached the common room, but it wasn't as empty as he would have thought, Hermione was sitting on the couch apparently doing the same thing he had planned on doing. She turned at the sound of Harry's final footsteps off of the stairway and with a smile she quietly said, "Merry Christmas Harry."

Harry smiled and replied, "Merry Christmas to you."

After placing his presents in the appropriate piles around the tree he sat down next to Hermione and said, "Care to join me for a quick Christmas greeting to Remus and Sirius?"

Hermione smiled softly and nodded as Harry un-wrapped the mirror and said, "Moony."

After staring at his reflection for a moment the screen went blank before Remus' face slowly faded onto the screen. A smile blossomed on their former defense professor's face as he warmly said, "Merry Christmas Harry."

Harry smiled and replied, "Merry Christmas to you Moony. Hermione's here so you can talk to her too."

Harry handed her the mirror and she smiled and said, "Merry Christmas Professor."

Remus chuckled and replied, "Merry Christmas to you as well Hermione. But, since I'm not your professor anymore please call me Moony or Remus."

Hermione nodded before handing the mirror back to Harry who said, "Did you get my gifts yet?"

Remus smiled as Sirius' face or rather part of his face squeezed into the corner of the mirror before he said, "Yes thanks Harry, the wizard's chess set should keep us busy for a little while."

Remus rolled his eyes at Sirius but agreed, "It is a lovely set Harry. I had an old one, but most of the pieces are too old to properly move around the board any more. So this was a most welcome gift."

After a few more minutes of chit-chat Remus smiled and said, "The both of you have a lovely time at the ball tonight." Remus called out to Hermione whose head crept onto the screen like Sirius' before he said, "You'll tell us if Harry does anything embarrassing, won't you?"

Hermione giggled and replied, "I think I've trained him pretty well at this point, but if he does something I'll tell you about it."

Harry groaned and said, "Great Remus, now you're going to make me even more nervous tonight." Hermione rolled her eyes and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Harry blushed brightly as Remus and Sirius laughed before he said, "Alright you two, I'll see you at the second task. I promise to keep in touch at least once a week." Remus and Sirius shared their goodbyes and the screen went blank before reverting back to Harry's reflection.

Back in Oxford, Remus turned to Sirius and said, "Those two are smitten with each other, even if they don't have the courage to say so to each other yet."

Sirius nodded and added, "Aye they're dancing on the edges still, but give them time they're still pretty young."

Remus nodded and said, "Alright you old mutt, ready to lose at chess again." Sirius barked out a laugh and grandly bowed before gesturing to the board. Remus smiled to himself, it was nice to have at least one of his best friends back again.

Back at Hogwarts the common room had eventually filled and the sound of presents being unwrapped broke the quiet of the early morning. Harry had managed a fine haul as received a Chudley Cannons t-shirt from Ron, sweets from Ginny, his typical Weasley family sweater and assorted mincemeat pies from Mrs. Weasley, and from Hermione a lovely old wind up wrist watch that she had placed various unbreakable and all condition charms upon.

Hermione received a charmed hairbrush from Ginny that wouldn't catch on tangles, a subscription to Teen Witch Weekly from Ron ("To become more like a girl" was Ron's backhanded way of explaining the gift), sweets from a few of the younger Gryffindors (sugar free of course), and a 1695 edition of Hogwarts a History that had an expanded section on the history of the library from Harry.

Ron received a broomstick servicing kit from Harry (for any future broom he would have), a book on the history of Chudley Canon strategies from Hermione, and various sweets and food from his mother to go with his bright green sweater.

Hermione had never really cared about getting one of the famed Weasley family sweaters, but in many ways Hermione was closer to Ginny than he was to Ron at the moment. After some thought Harry decided that it was hopeless trying to reason with Mrs. Weasley about much of anything. Even Hermione's apology letter at best had been very formal and without much meaning behind it.

Looking around the common room Harry let out a great yawn before he turned to the Weasley's and Hermione and said, "Let's go grab breakfast, so we can eat before the ball tonight."

Getting a minimal amount of response from the rest of the Gryffindors, Harry and his friends walked down to the great hall in their robes and pajamas.

The great hall was covered in strange looking sheets and had been completely cleared out aside from one table for the few people braving the castle for some breakfast. Harry panned his eyes around the hall before he turned to Hermione, who was buttering a piece of toast, and asked, "What do you think they're doing to the hall?"

Ron answered with a mouth full of food before Hermione as he said, "omfin ig ike addoween."

Harry shook his head ruefully at his friend even though he was fighting a smile as he said, "Yeah you're probably right mate. That would definitely make sense." Ron merely nodded and returned to shoveling food into his mouth.

Hermione sighed and asked, "For those of us, namely girls, who can't speak slob would you care to translate?"

Harry choked on the juice he was drinking and began to cough quite badly as Hermione patted his back apologetically. When he finally stopped coughing Harry said, "He said it would probably be something like for the Halloween feast, but with winter and Christmas themes instead."

Hermione nodded and said, "Yes I imagine he's right; As much as it pains me to agree with Ron."

Harry gave Hermione a crooked smile, which did funny things to her stomach, and said, "Yes well, we have more important and enjoyable things to be on about later today anyways." Hermione immediately flashed ahead to her images of Harry dancing with her, holding her closely, and even inhaling his scent. All she could do was nod with a dreamy look in her eyes.

By noon the older girls had already left to get ready for the ball leaving the fourth and fifth year girls and all of the guys downstairs. Hermione and Ginny heard the clock tower toll signaling it was half past twelve and they stood along with the other girls and Hermione said, "Alright girls, the sixth and seventh years should be done by now, like they promised."

Hermione smiled and turned to Harry, who was looking at his watch in bafflement, before she leaned in to whisper and said, "I'll be down by six so be ready by then. The champion's and their dates don't enter until the last, so that should leave us plenty of time." Harry smiled and nodded and Hermione stroked his cheek with her hand for a moment before turning away and walking up the stairs to the girl's dorms.

Twenty-five minutes, twenty-five minutes, that was how long Harry was staring off into space thinking about how soft Hermione's hand was. Of course, it might have well been the rest of his life if he hadn't been roused. His daydreaming was broken up by Ron who looked concerned at his friend and asked, "Harry mate, did you hear me?"

Harry shook his head and smiled to himself at the pleasant distraction of Hermione's hand before he said, "No sorry mate, what did you say again?"

Ron looked at Harry strangely, and in a tone that indicated that the question had been asked multiple times, he slowly said, "Do you fancy a game of chess?"

Harry glanced at his watch, which read one p.m. and nodded as Ron slid his chair and the board over to where he was sitting. As the board reset itself from the previous game Ron said, "So Harry, you never told me who your date was."

Harry smiled and replied, "You'll find out when I enter the ball I wager. Remember I told you, she's the prettiest witch on the grounds."

Ron frowned and asked, "Are you going with Fleur then?"

Harry shook his head and smiled as his pawn moved forward to start the match, and he was certain eventual defeat. After Ron's rook took one of Harry's bishops he said, "Harry mate, what do you think about Hermione? I mean it's obvious she doesn't have a date, so is like she erm a lesbian or something?"

Harry snorted as one of his knights took a pawn and replied, "Ron, why do you insist it's so obvious she doesn't have a date? Is it because she turned you down? Fleur turned you down too; I don't hear you calling her a lesbian."

Ron apparently didn't have answer to that, or if he did he didn't like the implications of it, and let the matter drop for the rest of the game, and the game afterwards. By three-thirty Harry was beginning to feel a bit ripe from skipping his shower earlier and said, "Alright mate that's enough for me, I have to get a shower and get ready for the ball." Ron nodded and went over to Neville to get in another couple of games before getting ready himself.

Harry took a nice long shower, it was nearly four-thirty by the time he had finished and begun to prepare for the ball. Ron, Neville, Seamus, and Dean were already in their dress robes when Harry returned to the dorm in his boxers. By five-thirty Harry was fidgeting with his bow-

tie for his robes. Dress robes were closer in appearance to a tuxedo than typical robes in their design and Harry's black dress robes with his white undershirt were really quite stylish.

As Harry walked out of the bathroom Ron was standing near the door and he said, "I've got to go pick up Padma out by the great hall. I'll see you and your mystery date when the champions arrive." Harry nodded as he reached into the breast pocket of his robes and felt the gift he had gotten from Remus a few days earlier.

Walking down into the common room he spotted Ginny and Neville standing together and Harry said with a wink, "Whoa Neville, who's that hot witch you've got there?"

Neville blushed and Ginny giggled before she said, "Just wait until you see your date Harry, she should be ready in about twenty minutes. Trust me, you won't be disappointed." Harry smiled and waved as they walked out of the portrait hole en route to the great hall.

Harry glanced down at his watch and it read nearly six when he heard the soft clicking that surely had to be Hermione's shoes slowly walking down the stairs. Harry walked over to the bottom step to help her and when she came into view he was certain that his heart skipped a beat. It was Hermione, but she didn't look like the cute bookworm she normally was in Hogwarts. No, she was beautiful in an almost otherworldly way. Her hair was tamed for the night, still curly but tied back into an intricate style of some sort that sat perfectly on her head with a couple of springy strands framing her face like the portrait of beauty she was. Clearing his throat as he took her hand and helped her down the last step he said, "You, erm...you look beautiful."

Hermione's smile reminded him of something that men had killed for in the past, that thrill of being with a girl so beautiful that everything else became tertiary at best. With a girl so beautiful both inside and out that made his heart thump painfully in his chest. A passing thought told Harry that there may be girls that were more beautiful in other's opinions. But not a single one of those opinions mattered to him at that perfect wonderful moment.

Stopping a few steps short of the portrait hole he pulled out the simple silver bracelet with their birthstones framing an inscription:

HJP + HJG 25/12/94

Hermione offered her wrist for the bracelet as she simply glowed with happiness before she said, "Thank you Harry, it's beautiful."

Harry smiled as he hooked his arm around hers and as they stepped out of the portrait hole he said, "To the ball milady."

Harry smiled as they reached the last stairs before the entrance of the great hall and immediately several whispers rippled throughout the gathered students, not already in the hall. By the time they reached the floor, Professor McGonagall walked up to them and with a twinkle in her eye and a gentle smile said, "You both look wonderful, Gryffindor's finest to be certain."

With a soft glare she added to Harry, "Mr. Potter I do hope you don't step on Ms. Granger's toes too much tonight." Harry's eyes widened when he realized she was teasing him. Harry had just managed to close his mouth when the doors of the great hall swung fully open and the champions and their dates walked into the hall.

Hermione leaned over to Harry and softly asked, "Are you ready?"

Harry smiled with a loving look, he wasn't quite ready to verbalize, and said, "With you, I'm always ready." Hermione smiled as and as they entered the hall murmurs went throughout the crowd.

Harry heard people say, "Is that Hermione Granger...Wow Granger is pretty hot....Oh Harry looks so dreamy...So that's who they were going with."

Harry managed to catch a glimpse of Ron who frankly looked both awed and angry at the same time, which was really quite a ridiculous sight.

Reaching the dance floor Hermione said, "Remember, it's simple; just do it like we did in the common room Harry."

Dumbledore looked at the assorted couples with a wide smile and said, "Now, the ceremonial first dance for the champions and their dates. Following the ceremonial dance we will be having our feast and then the dance floor will open. For tonight's listening pleasure we have the Weird Sisters." Several of the girls let out happy gasps as the orchestra began to play a waltz.

Harry was certain that if he was dancing with anyone other than Hermione, he would be stumbling over his feet and making a fool of himself. But, as they smoothly pivoted and continued their waltz they managed to look the part and do so with a certain level of style and sophistication.

All too soon the moment was over and the champion's were ushered over to the head table where Harry pulled Hermione's chair and helped her to sit. Sitting next to her Harry smiled and said, "That wasn't too bad."

Hermione smiled and like she had done earlier she reached her hand up to his cheek and brushed it gently before she said, "I knew you'd be fine Harry."

Their gazes were locked and if either of them had that little extra courage, it would have been the perfect moment for that first true kiss. As it was, the moment was lost as Dumbledore said, "A lovely dance Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger, I must say you both look quite smart tonight."

Harry couldn't help but smile at the odd way Dumbledore had phrased that and glanced over to the headmaster dressed in some regal looking robes of his own Harry said, "You look spiffy too Headmaster."

Hermione coughed to cover her giggle before she turned her laughing and accusing eyes to Harry and said, "You are so going to get it later for that Harry."

Harry chuckled before he broke eye contact and glanced around the rest of the table at the other champions and their dates. Cedric had come with Cho Chang, who looked quite lovely in her dress and if Harry had to make a description she looked beautiful like fine

porcelain. Viktor was with a Durmstrang girl who looked suspiciously similar to Hermione, although she was a poor substitute based on Viktor's expression on his face. Fleur had come with Roger Davies of Ravenclaw, and the poor sap was barely managing to avoid an unseemly show of drooling all over her. The various headmasters rounded out the table and Mr. Crouch sat at the head of the table looking considerably more in control than he had two months earlier.

Conversation around the table was polite and didn't gain too much depth as they ate and laughed for nearly an hour. Soon enough The Weird Sisters took the stage and Hermione tugged Harry back out on to the dance floor to dance to their faster songs and sway to their slower songs.

Ginny and Neville danced over to them during one of the slower songs and Ginny said, "You two were smashing for the first dance. You definitely were the best dancers out there."

Harry and Hermione blushed at the praise as the bracelet on her wrist around Harry's neck jangled melodically. Ginny's eyes widened and she squealed before seizing Hermione's arm and looking the bracelet over rather thoroughly. Hermione looked rather pleased about the entire thing and Harry and Neville shared an amused glance before Harry said, "Girls, Neville and I are going to go grab some drinks. Why don't you grab a table and continue the conversation there." Hermione smiled and grabbed Ginny's arm and dragged her to a table across the dance floor as Harry and Neville went to the drinks table.

As they poured their drinks Harry smiled and asked, "Having fun tonight Neville?"

Neville smiled as he took the ladle and poured his drinks before he answered, "I-I like being able to feel proud of how I look for once and well Ginny she's great."

Harry smiled as he looked out onto the dance floor and laughing as Fred and Angelina were dancing rather energetically, which earned them a nice wide berth from the other dancers. Harry and Neville grabbed their drinks before Harry replied to Neville's statement, "Neville, you have no reason not to be proud of who you are. All you

need is a little confidence and you could be a great wizard. You're already a great friend, which I think is a lot more important in the grand scheme of things." Neville smiled widely at Harry whose eyes were scanning the various tables until he came across a sight he really didn't want to see, Hermione and Ginny yelling at Ron about something.

As they approached, the girls managed to stop arguing, and Ron turned to Harry and was about to say something when Harry casually waved his hand and cast a wandless silencing charm on him. Harry handed Hermione her drink and Neville did the same for Ginny before Harry canceled the charm on Ron, who was now beet red with anger.

Harry sighed and simply said, "No Ron, you aren't going to pull this tonight so don't try it." Ron opened his mouth and Harry merely raised his hand and continued, "I will hex you if you try to start something, and don't doubt that I've learned some nasty ones from Professor Moody."

Ron was still tense but managed to remain silent as Harry softly continued, "You need to get over this, whether it is a matter of you growing up or if you just can't be our friend any more. But, I *won't* have you insulting us or provoking us at the drop of a hat just because you're a prat. You've dug a deep hole this year mate, and forgiveness, especially forgiveness within reason, well it can only stretch so far. I like to think Hermione and I have bent over backwards to keep from hexing your hair off and giving you a real reason to be angry after everything you've said. Now for the last time Ron, think about what you want and then figure out an adult solution to how you want to get there."

Harry took a swig of his drink before he offered his hand to Hermione and said, "Let's go outside for a bit of a walk." Hermione took his hand and stood and looped her arm around Harry's as they walked out into the courtyard for a nice walk in the early winter night air.

As soon as they reached the courtyard Harry took off his outer jacket of his robes and wrapped it around Hermione's trembling shoulders. As they walked in silence they felt the night perhaps reaching another of those perfect moments and after the talk with Ron, the old

Gryffindor courage was running high. Just as Harry was about to say something they happened upon Snape and Karkaroff talking behind a pillar.

Hermione placed her hand on Harry's lip and signaled for him to listen in:

Karkaroff's left forearm was bared clearly showing the dark mark as he said, "Look at how clear it is Severus. Surely you know what this means. He is almost back to full strength."

Snape spoke in an oily voice as he said, "I see it Igor but I made my choice long ago, and I will not go back on Dumbledore now. As much as it pains me to say it, Potter will be a competent leader for the next generation of fighters, his performance against the dragon shows as much."

Karkaroff's voice took on a shrill tone as he said, "You haff Dumbledore's protection Severus, it is not a luxury I myself haff."

Snape shrugged and said, "I can not change the bed you have already made for yourself Igor. Now I must be going." Snape walked off in the opposite direction as Karkaroff as Harry and Hermione shared a look, which conveyed some understanding of a large picture but not enough to bring it all into focus.

After waiting for the coast to be clear they walked out of the courtyard, simply following where their feet carried them as the music from the ball drifted out into the night.

Harry turned to Hermione as they cut across the field by Hagrid's cabin, and prepared to double back around to the castle. Harry finally spoke as they turned back to the castle as he said, "I've been feeling something strong for you for a little while now Hermione. Tonight it only grew stronger. I don't know if it's love, because frankly I haven't really experienced enough love to make that distinction. But I do know that when I look at you, and not just tonight, I feel lighter and for the first time happy."

Hermione smiled at Harry love clearly in her eyes as she said, "Harry, I do have some experience with love, but not the romantic kind. I've

seen my parents when they act romantic to each other on a day to day basis and I can tell you now, I can envision doing the same kinds of things with you when we are old and gray. I'm not trying to pressure you Harry, and in fact as long as the tournament goes I think we should just stay where we are in our relationship. But sometime soon in the future I would like to take that next step in our relationship." Hermione's nose crinkled cutely and she said, "I hate that word, relationship. Let's just call what we have good, and say that *it* could get better, but that the time isn't right now for *it*."

Harry smiled and as they reentered the courtyard to the dying sounds of the ball he said, "Not now, but soon."

A/N: Man I think I deserve some kind of an award or a badge of honor of sorts. This is by far my longest chapter to date, and I can see more chapters of this length in the chapters ahead. Next chapter, Ron finally makes some progress with help from a most unusual source. Classes will continue on and I know you might think I forgot it, but we have a breakthrough for someone in their animagus transformations. There will be more but that's enough for now.

Thanks to all of my faithful readers and if you review, take the time to add on an answer to the question in the a/n at the beginning. Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 11

To describe Ron Weasley as miserable would be an understatement of monumental proportions. If it wasn't the dressing down Harry had given him during the ball for being a jealous prat, it was the more private dressing down Professor McGonagall had given him as he exited the ball at the end of the night. It was true that Hermione had blown him away for the night, but the voice in his head told him that Hermione would never be his, because whether or not they would admit it; Harry and Hermione were just one of those unavoidable things.

Ron rolled out of bed, for once earlier than Harry, who was still sleeping with a goofy grin on his face largely thanks to the events of the previous night. As Ron looked at his one time best friend he realized that he needed to make some changes as Harry had discussed the prior night, or a good hexing would be the least of his concerns. The words of Harry's closing just a few short hours ago still echoed in his mind as he grabbed a change of clothes and stomped over to the bathroom to take a shower and perhaps find some answers. After all most of his best ideas came to him while in the bathroom.

Hermione opened her eyes slowly to find the bright eyes of Crookshanks looking at her expectantly from a scant few inches away. Having grown accustomed to similar wake ups in the past she wasn't startled at all as she rolled Crookshanks and his pot belly off to the side and pulled her covers back. Looking back at the ball from the previous night, a soft smile spread over her face, and her hair had been thoroughly mussed from sleeping the previous night. Releasing a fluttering sigh she dropped her legs off of her bed and slid her slippers on as she grabbed a robe cinching it off before wandering over to her wardrobe to prepare for another day.

Harry Potter on the other hand was having a nice lie in as he aimlessly had dreams about a giant treacle tart, a Quidditch match where all of the players flew on Hippogriffs instead of brooms, and a final dream involving Hermione wearing much less than she had been at the Yule Ball. With that in mind Harry woke up feeling better after a

night of sleep than he could ever remember beforehand and rolled out of bed intent on getting a shower and starting Boxing Day with a smile on his face.

After a quick shower Harry sauntered down into the common room to find only a few people in the room, apparently others were sharing the same sentiment of having a nice lie in. He spotted Hermione sitting in her favorite chair reading the 300-year-old edition of *Hogwarts a History* he had given her for Christmas. Taking a seat by her bunny slippers he smiled and asked, "Anything interesting in there?"

Hermione pulled her book closer to her body in order to gaze down at Harry before she replied, "Yes, from the little I've read I can tell that the goblin rebellions have been seriously censored in our history texts and the newer editions of *Hogwarts a History*. This edition has a section entirely devoted to indentured servant witches and wizards doing the same job of the house elves now. Primarily they were Irish witches and wizards and even a few puritans were granted safe harbor at the castle in exchange for a servitude contract."

Harry nodded, not really having much to add to the train of thought before he looked around and quietly asked, "Are we going to work on our transformations again tonight?"

Hermione's lips quirked into a little bit of a smirk, it had becoming one of her favorite sources for teasing Harry knowing that she was progressing through the process much more quickly than Harry thanks to her skills in transfiguration. In fact, Hermione had a suspicion she might even be able to get her first glimpse at her form. Finally, she managed a reply, "Well one of us will be working on it anyways."

Harry cracked a tiny grin and replied, "Some of us aren't naturally gifted at transfiguration. I still think I'm doing pretty well though." Hermione gave him a conciliatory smile and nodded as she slid out of her chair and sat down against the chair and leaned into Harry as she began to read to him about some rumored hidden chambers throughout the castle.

Ron had spotted Hermione in the common room when he had finally come down, and without a second thought he raced out of the portrait hole before she could even notice his presence. For once deciding against breakfast Ron aimlessly wandered the castle in an effort to find the root of his problems. Of course, considering the look was inwards it was a very short search.

The problem Ron had was that all of his emotions were all over the radar, which made it nearly impossible to pinpoint where to start. He still felt betrayed by his friends for going to the ball without telling him, ashamed for feeling that way considering all he had put his friends through during the year, and oddly enough heartbroken that for every sign pointed in that direction that Hermione had picked Harry after all. Ron might not be a genius but even he knew that his friends were going to make a long run of it together, they complemented each other too well not to.

As Ron rounded a corner near the exit leading to the greenhouse he ran into Malfoy, who was for once without the aid of his two bodyguards. Ron tersely grasped his wand and spat out, "What the bloody hell are you doing so far away from your snake hole Malfoy?"

Draco smirked and arched his eyebrow before he responded, "Weasel, weasel, weasel I know you're heartbroken over the mudblood picking Potter over you, but why all the hostility?"

Ron scowled and said, "Oh shove off Malfoy."

Draco sensed weakness so he continued to prod, "I know this shouldn't surprise you, everyone has been waiting for something to happen between those two all year. Of course maybe if you weren't so busy trying to make your friends your enemies you'd have figured it out awhile ago." Ron's scowl only deepened as Malfoy continued to needle, "It's quite pathetic really weasel, the one thing in your life that wasn't a hand me down and you're mucking it up."

Ron groaned and ran a hand through his hair testily, but Malfoy's smirk persisted before he started to walk again and turned over his shoulder as he sneered, "One of these days weasel."

Ron blinked and a moment later Malfoy was gone. Unfortunately, in the heat of the moment he forgot to even question why Malfoy would be in the greenhouse in the first place. The only thing Ron was thinking, was *What the Bloody Hell Was That?*

That night Harry was the one to show up last as he stumbled upon Hermione spread out on the couch as Crookshanks was getting a rather thorough tummy rub. Only by the grace of the pugnacious half kneazle was Harry spared a nice scratching for interrupting said rubbing. Harry and Crookshanks were on considerably warmer terms than Ron and the feline were, and this was one of those circumstances where that was properly asserted. Crookshanks had seemingly developed a sense of when Hermione needed to get down to work, and he rolled away from his witch just as Harry asked, "So, ready to go then?"

Hermione smiled at Harry and nodded before she began to describe the new limitations on what transfigurations they could perform.

The process to becoming an animagus was a long and difficult one, that could be accomplished one of a few different ways. The most common way was the form that Harry and Hermione were practicing themselves. For those with forms, progressively more and more difficult self transfigurations were designed to lubricate the transfiguration pathways in a witch or wizard's body that ultimately led to a spontaneous transformation when enough progress had been made.

Hermione pulled her wand from her pocket as Harry did the same and they slowly worked on transfiguring their fingers as a warm up. It was plain to see that Hermione was better at this seeing as how she had finished both hands in the time it took Harry to do one hand. She looked over at Harry and smirked slightly, although she was quite proud with Harry's work, and it had show up in a vastly improved mark in transfiguration for her dearest friend.

Just as she was about to move on to transfiguring her entire hand she felt a strange tingling sensation all over her body before she felt her body slowly shift and lengthen before she stopped and was on all fours. Harry was looking at her in wonder before he shook his head

and transfigured a chair into a long mirror. Hermione felt her whiskers twitch as she looked into the mirror and for the first time saw her form of a jaguar with reddish brown fur and the telltale spots coinciding with the specific species of cat.

As was their arrangement Harry cast the same spell forcing an animagus to revert back to their human form and Hermione quickly reappeared although panting slightly from her first successful transformation. Harry smirked and said, "I don't think there are too many jaguars in Scotland, or all of Britain for that matter."

Hermione was still panting heavily but a very pleased smile had crossed her face, part in satisfaction for managing her transformation so soon, and part in anticipation to find Harry's form sooner with her added help. Focusing on the feeling of change she had when she first successfully transformed she once again managed the transformation revealing a unique looking jaguar. This time she focused on her expanded feline senses and could detect an odor that was uniquely Harry before she looked into the darkened corners of the room and could see things she hadn't been able to a moment earlier. Glancing back at Harry, who was still working on his transfigurations, he would glance at her in wonder and admiration occasionally in a way that reminded her so much of the bedraggled young boy she had met for the first time on the Hogwarts express three and a half years ago.

Concentrating on that same feeling she managed to successfully transform herself back to her human form, and while her exhaustion had reached new levels she managed a faint smile as she said; "Now we just have to work on your transformation Harry, and we can focus solely S.P.H.E.R.E." Harry nodded excitedly and continued to transfigure his body, hopeful that it would be sooner rather than later.

By Sunday the castle had finally begun to settle from the excitement of the holidays, and the additional excitement that the ball had brought. Harry and Hermione were sitting in the great hall enjoying breakfast when the daily prophet arrived and a copy was dropped into Hermione's lap.

Hermione pulled the paper up and began reading before a soft moan came from behind the paper. Harry arched an eyebrow and leaned

back to see a picture of Hagrid that was plainly fabricated showing their gentle friend flailing his arms about and frothing from the mouth. The article read:

Half-Giant is One Half Too Much

By: Rita Skeeter

Sources have revealed that the current Professor for Care of Magical Creatures at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in fact half-giant in ancestry. Professor Rubeus Hagrid is shown above during one of his typical episodes when he enters into the tell tale rage of his giant heritage.

When asked students chimed in on their opinion of the Hagrid, “All I know is that last year one of the students was seriously injured and he wasn’t even sacked for it.” Marcus Flint Slytherin 6th year.

It is of public record that Professor Hagrid was sent to Azkaban Prison nearly two years ago for suspicion of involvement in a rash of attacks throughout the school. For both instances Hagrid has been freed thanks to heavy political maneuvering by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore.

Perhaps most troubling was the public snapping of Hagrid’s wand nearly fifty years ago whilst Hagrid was a student at Hogwarts. Under suspicion for involvement in the death of a student, Hagrid never faced a trial and was given haven at Hogwarts working as a caretaker for the grounds.

This reporter is left to ponder, how many more similar stories of unnecessary danger mixed in with education can be found at Hogwarts and with the obvious dangers presented why does Albus Dumbledore seem to be going out of his way to keep Mr. Hagrid so close to children?

Harry blinked before he turned to Hermione and asked, “What’s the big deal about being half-giant?”

Hermione smiled in understanding and replied, "There is yet another stereotype that giants are wild killing savages. Of course, like most of the other stereotypes it's complete rubbish. Unfortunately, most people buy into these stereotypes and I don't see a way Hagrid will be able to keep his professorship after this."

Harry frowned as he glanced up at the staff table to see Hagrid conspicuously absent from his usual seat by Professor Flitwick. Harry turned back to Hermione and asked, "Fancy a trip down to Hagrid's hut?"

Hermione glanced around looking for Ron, any of Hagrid's friends should be there to lend support as she was quite certain Hagrid would be feeling depressed about the business. Ron however, was once again absent and a tinge of worry colored Hermione's thoughts based upon Ron's exceedingly strange behavior since the Yule Ball. After giving up the effort as lost she turned back to Harry and gave him a small frown but nodded as they both stood and walked towards the exit of the great hall.

After grabbing their winter cloaks Harry and Hermione trudged through the holiday snow, passing a couple of snowmen and some other more obscene snow sculptures across the grounds towards Hagrid's hut. Upon reaching the hut Harry called out, "Hagrid let us in; we'd like to talk to you."

After waiting a few moments Hermione tried in a softer tone, "Please Hagrid let us in; it's getting quite cold out here in the snow."

A moment later the door to Hagrid's hit swung open revealing their half-giant friend who looked like he had been crying a fair amount and from the smell of things chasing his tears with some Ogden's. Hagrid pulled out a large hanky and blew his nose letting out a loud trumpeting sound in the process. Hermione took Hagrid's hand and led him over to his chair before she asked, "Where is your tea Hagrid?" Hagrid pointed to a shelf and Hermione nodded with her head at the kettle, as Harry walked over and put the kettle on a small blue bell flame he conjured on Hagrid's magical range.

Harry walked over and sat on the arm of Hagrid's other arm chair before he said, "Hagrid, we read today's paper, and we just wanted to

tell you that we don't think any less of you. I think it was you who told Hermione, there isn't a spell that she couldn't do. Well there isn't a person I'd trust more than you Hagrid. You were my first friend. I want you to know that."

Hermione smiled encouragingly at Hagrid, who appeared to calm some at Harry's words before he said, "Er yah sure it don bother yer none?"

Hermione jumped in and said, "Hagrid I had always suspected you had some giant blood, and it never bothered me before."

Harry shrugged and added, "I think you know us better than that Hagrid."

Hagrid nodded as the kettle went off. Harry grabbed the kettle and poured the water into the cups before Hermione handed them out.

Hermione frowned in thought before she asked, "Hagrid, I assume the headmaster sealed any files indicating you heritage to prevent just such a situation from arising. Have you mentioned your heritage to anyone lately?"

Hagrid flushed and an indignant expression crossed his face as he replied, "Aye I wer talking to Olympe."

Harry arched his eyebrow and asked, "Olympe?"

Hagrid shook his head and said, "Aye Madam Maxime." Harry and Hermione nodded as Hagrid continued, "It wers Christmas night and I managed ter ask Olympe to join me on a walk out by my hut. I guess I figured out she was half-giant like me about a month ago and took the chance ter talk her up about it. Of course she denied it and I might'r got a littah excited and yelled at her erbout it."

Harry and Hermione shared a look, and another puzzle piece about one Rita Skeeter snapped into its proper place. They were missing something big, but they didn't know what yet, it definitely had become a fly in their ointment.

The rest of the afternoon was spent reminiscing about old times and talking about the tournament and Harry's preparations. By the end of the afternoon they had managed to get a promise from Hagrid that despite his lost professorship he would continue as master of the keys and sit up at the staff table during meals.

By the time they returned to the castle night was beginning to fall, and the common room was already beginning to empty. Harry thought he caught a flash of red hair scurry up the stairs to the boy's dormitory just as they entered, but then he chalked it up to his imagination.

Harry sat down heavily on the couch and stared at the flames for a long moment before he pulled his mirror from his pocket and glanced around to see if anyone else was around. He saw Hermione in the corner furiously writing in a notebook of some sort and he waved the mirror around until she caught a glint of the light from the fireplace.

Hermione turned and spotted Harry waving the mirror and quickly folded up her notebook before walking over to the couch and folding her legs under her as she sat down. Harry smiled at her and asked, "What were you working on?"

Hermione blushed and said, "It's um not finished. I promise to show you first when it is."

Harry arched an eyebrow but decided to let the matter slide as he said, "I was wondering if you might want to join me for a chat with Mooney and Padfoot."

Hermione smiled and nodded as Harry called out, "Mooney" and a moment later Remus appeared on the mirror with a smile on his face. He looked somewhat haggard and Hermione whispered into his ear that the full moon was coming up in a day.

Harry smiled at his, well surrogate uncle and said, "Hey Mooney, I can see you aren't feeling too well, so I'll keep it short tonight." Remus nodded and waved his hands as a moment later Sirius poked his head into the screen.

Harry chuckled at the sight and said, "Actually I think Hermione has something to show you."

Hermione smirked at Harry as he swung it around to show Hermione transforming into a leopard before transforming back a moment later. Remus was first to speak and said, "Remarkable."

Harry smiled and proudly said, "Took her less than four months to master it too."

Sirius' eyes bugged in his head before he asked, "How about you Harry?"

Harry's grin faltered slightly before he replied, "I erm am getting closer. Hermione seems to think I am a little over half way to accomplishing my first transformation."

Sirius nodded happily and said, "Hermione certainly is the brightest witch of her age. By all accounts you are doing quite remarkable as well. It took your father, the rat, and I a little over two years to master the transformation and we managed to practice during the summers too. So don't feel badly that you haven't mastered it yet."

Harry smiled slightly, feeling unaccustomed to the feel of parental or some strain of parental love, and managed a quiet, "Thanks."

Hermione noticed the slight shift in Harry's mood and said, "Well, seeing as how tomorrow is one of those nights for Prof-Remus, I think we should let you go. Both of you stay safe, and Remus, do remember to take your potion."

Remus smiled and nodded looking bolstered by Hermione's words as Sirius ruffled his friend's hair and said, "I'll take care of him lass, and now we have some time to think of a proper marauder nickname for you."

The image on the mirror slowly faded away leaving their reflection and Hermione softly asked, "Alright there Harry?"

Harry let out a breath and with a small smile said, "Yeah, I think I am."

The remainder of the holiday went by far too quickly for Harry's tastes as he resumed training with Moody near the back end of it and managed to learn some advanced shield charms, and cast all but the

most advanced of them. Moody suggested some books to research for other means of swimming underwater, while they both still puzzled over what the thing was that would be taken from each of the champions.

Classes resumed for the second term of the school year and the first sign of changes were felt as the students were introduced to their new Care of Magical Creatures professor, Professor Grubbly-Plank. Professor Grubbly-Plank was a middle aged witch who always had a pipe in her mouth and she began her first lecture with a much more relaxed air than most professors they had come across.

"Welcome class, I am your new Professor replacing outgoing Professor Hagrid. Professor Hagrid has been a great help and I will continue his course outline for the remainder of the year. With one exception, we will not be continuing our study of the Blast-Ended Skrewts." A general cheer went through the class including Harry and Hermione.

Grubbly-Plank smiled and continued, "Today we will be studying a creature that only the girls of the class will be able to approach, Unicorns. Follow me to the edge of the woods, and the girls that wish to may hand feed them will be given the proper grains. Boys stay back and observe, note taking is suggested."

Hermione looked pleadingly at Harry who smiled and said, "Go on I'll take good notes for you." Hermione looked around quickly and gave Harry a quick peck on the cheek before running over to the grain stores and grabbing some feed.

As Hermione and the majority of the other girls concentrated on feeding the beautiful and pure creatures Harry took down notes every time Grubbly-Plank made a comment and smiled as he watched the girls play with the unicorns.

Class was beginning to wind down when Malfoy walked up behind Harry and said, "Hey Pothead, you're looking rather chipper for someone who has lost a pair of friends over the holidays. Maybe you got laid by the mudblood."

Harry rolled his eyes before he turned back to Malfoy and said, "Honestly Malfoy, I would almost think you were gay as much as you worry about my love life."

Malfoy pinked and couldn't muster an adequate response as Grubbly-Plank dismissed class. Harry spotted Ron off to the side glancing at him occasionally with a very thoughtful look on his face; he only hoped it meant that Ron was still trying to save the tattered remains of their friendship.

Charms class with Flitwick was the most interesting it had been the entire year, as the class worked on summoning and banishing charms. Harry had a flashback to the game he saw at the campgrounds during the world cup, and surprised everyone by managing to master the summoning charm *Accio* first, while Hermione mastered the banishing charm *Remitto* first earning more worthless points for Gryffindor house. The hourglass counters still functioned however, and Gryffindor house was for once in a commanding lead before the end of the school year.

By the second Saturday of the term the entire school had begun to gear up for the second task in around five weeks, as a Hogsmeade weekend was held. As Harry and Hermione boarded the carriages down to Hogsmeade they spotted Krum diving into the great lake, no doubt practicing for the second task.

Hermione spotted this and said, "Tomorrow we'll work on figuring out how you can breathe underwater aside from a bubblehead charm."

Harry frowned and nodded before he added, "We need to find out what kind of creatures are in the great lake too. I mean aside from the giant squid."

Hermione furrowed her brow before she said, "From what I've read Great Britain's inland bays are often filled with Grindylows and merpeople. But, you're right we should do some research to prepare for any surprises." Her expression grew guarded as she asked, "Have you figured out what they're going to take from you yet?"

Harry sighed heavily before he turned to Hermione and honestly answered, "I love my firebolt, but I wouldn't kill myself trying to rescue

it underwater. From what I've reasoned, it will probably be a person we would dearly miss." Harry finished looking at Hermione very meaningfully, as the message was adequately sent. Hermione gulped and remained silent for the rest of the ride into Hogsmeade.

The next day found Harry and Hermione in the library poring through various books on aquatic magic, aquatic Herbology, and aquatic potions.

Harry had drawn the short straw and was reading the book on aquatic potions when he came across something of interest, "Hermione I have a potion here that is supposed to simulate the effects of Gillyweed for up to twenty minutes. What exactly is Gillyweed?"

Hermione's eyes widened as she opened the Herbology book and quickly leafed back to the index before she quickly leafed to a page and said, "Oh I think this could be the perfect solution. It mentions here that Gillyweed's effects last approximately one hour. If it takes you more than an hour to save me you can cast a bubblehead charm."

Harry frowned and asked, "Can I cast a bubblehead charm while underwater?"

Hermione nodded and said, "The bubblehead charm is a conjuration it would just change the water around your head into an air bubble." Hermione frowned and said, "Oh dear, this is an extremely rare plant. I'm afraid we'll need someone's help to get some."

Harry tapped his fingers on the desk before he asked, "Does it say what kind of shelf life the stuff has?"

Hermione scanned the passage once again and said, "According to this, the Gillyweed loses potency exponentially three months after being freshly picked."

Harry nodded and called out, "Dobby." A moment later Dobby appeared and Harry said, "Dobby I need for you to procure some freshly picked Gillyweed for me by the end of the week. Can you manage that?"

Dobby's smile nearly lit the room up as he said, "Of course Master Harry, Dobby be getting freshly picked Gillyweed by ends of the week."

Harry smiled and said, "Thank you Dobby, you will be getting paid for doing this outside of your work for the school. We can negotiate that once you've given me it though." Dobby nodded and vanished with a very soft pop, apparently understanding it was a library and loud noises were frowned upon.

Hermione looked at Harry and they shared a tired smile before she said, "Well that's one less thing to worry about." Of course for every one step they took forward it seemed fate would sent them back two, who said that destiny didn't have a sense of humor?

A/N: Minor shift this chapter, my question of the chapter comes at the end this time.

Do you think Snape is truly a traitor following the events of HBP, or is there more to the story than appears? Conspiracy theories with a little bit of backing are welcome. I might even respond with one of my own!

Thanks to all of my reviewers from last chapter, the response for this story continues to be the best of any of my stories to date. I hope all of you like Hermione's animagus form, I haven't personally read one where her form is a jaguar, but odds are it's been done somewhere else before. Harry's form will come between the second and third tasks. For those of you that think this is coming too fast, remember the marauders started the process as second years, a lot of the more advanced transfiguration was beyond them at that time.

Next chapter, Ron's education continues from the most unlikely of places (someone different), Skeeter strikes again, and the second task in all of its bloody glory. Thanks to all of you that have read and reviewed.

Chapter 12

It had been a month since the apparent break of the strongest friendship the school has seen since the marauders. Ron still was making a habit of wandering aimlessly trying to find the answers to questions that had become engrained into his very being. *What was he doing? What was his problem? What would it take to fix it?*

Ron had found himself wandering on the second floor, where Harry had described the headmaster's office being located following their adventure in the chamber of secrets. The one adventure that he had shared with Harry alone, Hermione had been petrified in bed, although her presence had been felt in other ways that year.

Ron frowned to himself as Malfoy's words still echoed in his head, "the one thing in your life that wasn't a hand me down and you're mucking it up." Was Malfoy closer to the truth than he had originally thought?

He knew now that even back in second year, Harry and Hermione had already begun to gravitate together based upon all of the time his best mate spent talking to her petrified form. Of course last year he had missed something with the time turner, although he really didn't know what exactly it involved. Of course maybe that had grated on him more than anything else, Harry and Hermione had managed an adventure on their own and they really didn't need him anymore.

After all they'd been doing just fine the entire year without him, but they had tried to include him several different times. Ron couldn't forget Harry getting him a decent set of dress robes, simply to spare him the embarrassment of wearing the ghastly things in public. How did he repay them? By acting like a prat because Harry had wised up and realized that Hermione was a special girl, the kind that didn't come along often.

Ron was rounding a final corner, just as the gargoyle statue guarding the headmaster's office came into view, the resident grouch Professor Snape ran smack into him, with Ron releasing a surprised oomph.

Ron fell rather ungracefully to his bum as Snape swayed for a moment before righting himself and affixing the young Gryffindor with a pitying look. Ron immediately knew the look; it was one he had been getting more frequently during his wanderings. But, coming from his greasy git of a potions professor only enraged him as he stood and stiffly said, "I don't want your pity."

Snape's look of pity dropped away only to be replaced by his usual sneer of disdain, before he said, "Then you're fortunate that my look was one of pity in a memory and not for the childish buffoon standing before me."

Ron opened his mouth to retort and then closed it to think about what Snape had said. Snape smirked and said, "Very good Weasley, the first lesson is learned already. Try to think before you talk."

Ron continued his stunned silence as Snape pushed on, "My look of pity was for a remembered pain that I felt at your age." Snape seemed to measure his words and asked, "Tell me Mr. Weasley, do you know what a self-fulfilling prophecy is?"

Ron shook his head in the negative and Snape continued, "I thought not. Mr. Weasley a self-fulfilling prophecy is when a person, a student such as yourself is limited by their own view of their selves."

Ron blinked and Snape nodded before he continued, "Yes Mr. Weasley, the root of all of your problems, is that you believe everything Mr. Malfoy speaks of your family is the truth instead of seeing the truth for what it is."

Ron continued to look dumbly at Snape who sighed and said, "It is a rare blessing to have a family as rich and diverse as your own. Yet you see no worth, because you view worth in terms of possessions, accomplishments, and galleons." Snape smirked darkly and asked, "Tell me Mr. Weasley, would you have the strength and fortitude to survive as an orphan for your entire life? No? Perhaps you would be better suited to being called an insufferable-know-it-all and filthy mudblood every day?" Ron's mouth had opened as he gaped at Snape who shook his head and said, "No, I don't suppose you would."

Snape took a step to move clear of Ron before he turned and said, "Mr. Weasley?" Ron blinked and Snape continued, "Do not tell anyone of this, or I will make your life even more unbearable for the remainder of the year. I do after all, have a reputation to uphold."

By the first Wednesday of February, three weeks from the second task, Harry's training with Moody was winding down into review and the occasional practice duel. The defense Professor finally decided that he could teach Harry nothing else of value until he was older, so he followed through on the request of Dumbledore and sent Harry to the old wizard's office for some different but necessary training.

Harry sighed as he approached the gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office and muttered, "*Pumpkin Pasties*." The gargoyle slid aside revealing the spiral staircase that led to Dumbledore's office. Harry rubbed at his eyes as he spared a glance at his watch reading seven in the evening. Harry trudged up the steps and knocked upon the door, which was answered by a soft, "Come in."

Harry entered the office to see Dumbledore sitting behind his desk with a large stone basin, sitting off to the side and Fawkes napping up on his roost. Dumbledore glanced up from a parchment on his desk and smiled benignly as he said, "Ah Harry, right on time I suspect." Dumbledore pulled a pocket watch from his robes and nodded as Harry took a sit in front of the desk.

Dumbledore subtly tried legilimency as he did rarely in such instances, in an attempt to glean Harry's rough impression from the year. He was shocked when he ran into some simple but well fortified mental defenses that he could bypass, but obviously not without Harry's knowledge.

Harry arched his eyebrow as he felt the tingle of someone testing his shields for the first time, before he said, "Legilimency professor? I was under the impression that doing so against a person's will was heavily frowned upon."

Dumbledore blinked in surprise as Harry continued, "How did I know what you might be trying sir? It really isn't anything special, of that much I assure you. In the past whenever I was near Voldemort, such as first year with the stone, and then this summer when I had a

dream about him, there was always this stabbing pain in my head. My scar was sore, but the pain in my head overshadowed that. With you sir, it wasn't painful but more like a tickle." Harry straightened up in his chair before he asked, "So can you tell me, why you were peeking around in the first place sir?"

Dumbledore sighed and honestly said, "It is a skill I have been forced to practice, since you rarely tell anyone of your adventures. In my defense I have only 'peeked' three times before now: In the hospital wing following the confrontation with Quirrel and Tom, following the chamber of secrets incident, and last year to verify Sirius' innocence."

Harry fixed Dumbledore with a passive but measuring look before he nodded and said, "I appreciate your honesty sir. Just don't try it again." Dumbledore nodded respectfully, his opinion of Harry growing by leaps and bounds by the moment.

After a moment of silence as each of them assimilated the new knowledge of each other Dumbledore said, "Any misgivings I had before of what I am about to show you in the coming months have been put to rest. Do you plan on furthering your understanding of Occlumency and perhaps in legilimency?"

Harry smiled and replied, "Actually Hermione and I have arranged for a tutor over the summer with the help of Remus."

Dumbledore smiled and asked speculatively, "I take it you have cultivated a relationship with Remus this year?"

Harry nodded and said, "Yes, Sirius as well. In a perfect world I wouldn't have to live with the Dursleys at all."

Dumbledore nodded and then in a rare show of candor said, "I shall see what can be done in regards to this. Without speculating too much, I believe you could manage only a week a summer with your relatives and still protect other interests." Harry arched his eyebrow but nodded.

Dumbledore was lost in his musings of Harry for a long moment, *Harry it is not often that I am surprised but you have managed to do*

so in spades. The time is near, to tell you the prophecy; I fear I can not put it off in good conscience any longer.

Harry watched the old wizard drop into deep thought and in an amused tone he said, "Headmaster, you wanted me hear for some sort of training."

Dumbledore shook his head and stood before he genially said, "Of course Harry, pardon an old man I have many stray thoughts." Harry nodded and Dumbledore continued, "In fact, this is what I have summoned you here for tonight. As you have surmised from playing various games of wizard's chess, with your friend the young Mr. Weasley; In order to win a game, one must first understand what the various pieces do."

Harry stood at Dumbledore's beckoning as they both walked over to the large stone basin filled with a translucent silver fluid. Harry sighed as he glanced at the bowl before he asked, "So what exactly are we looking for sir?"

Dumbledore chuckled as he pulled his wand from his pocket and swirled the silver liquid around for a moment before nodding. He replaced his wand up the sleeve of his robes before he said, "What you see before you Harry, is an object called a pensieve. Witches and Wizards commonly use such an object to organize their thoughts and search for details they may have missed the first time they experienced the event."

Harry looked intrigued and said, "I think I experienced something similar before."

Dumbledore looked interested and asked, "Oh?"

Harry nodded and supplied, "The diary of Tom Riddle, I wrote in it once and it pulled me in to watch a few select memories."

Dumbledore frowned in thought before he muttered, "Memories imprinted along with an essence. Surely he couldn't have."

Harry sighed and said, "So what memories did you want to show me sir?"

Dumbledore blinked, realizing how distracted he had been since finding of Harry's new talents, and replied, "I am sorry my boy. The memories you shall see tonight are from two trials of convicted deatheaters following Tom's first downfall roughly fifteen years ago. Both of whom you have had direct contact with this year in some capacity. First, young Barty Crouch Jr. and his exposure and subsequent arrest occurred during the trial of Igor Karkaroff a deatheater and current headmaster of the Durmstrang Institute. A conviction in Barty's case is a mere afterthought."

Harry nodded as an image finally came into focus in the pensieve before Dumbledore said, "Dip your head into the bowl. We will be pulled into the memory and be able take in the subtle details of the event."

Harry nodded and unlike his experience with the diary a cold feeling wrapped around his shoulders, almost like the disillusionment charm but not nearly as intense. The next thing he knew he was sitting in a court room and as he wondered where it was Dumbledore spoke from the seat behind him, "This is indeed the Wizengamot court room. In the front row, you should see a younger version of myself and your current defense professor one Alastor Moody. I think you may find that discussion most enlightening."

Harry nodded as he stood and walked down the set of stairs before sitting on the steps next to Moody as he listened intently.

"Albus, I say we should send them through the veil and be done with it. After all if we had done that after you defeated Octavius, we wouldn't be dealing with Riddle and his troop of idiots now."

"Alastor, if we resort to such brutal tactics, then we would be no better than Tom was." Dumbledore's tone was tired, as though this was a recurring argument.

"Albus, you don't really believe young Potter defeated Voldemort do you?" Dumbledore sighed in response.

"Alastor, what I believe is irrelevant. The proof at the scene indicates that Tom's body was destroyed."

"Come now Albus, we both know that the body of a dark wizard is not nearly as important as their soul."

"We shall speak later Alastor, but I will not deny your thoughts. For now let us enjoy the application of justice to those that deserve it."

Harry mentally cataloged the conversation, because it had the feel of something important, something that was tickling his brain, but that he had not made the final connection yet.

Of to the left of his sitting spot a trap door opened and a large cage was raised through the floor to reveal a slightly disheveled but younger version of Igor Karkaroff.

The presiding judge was Barty Crouch Sr., although he had a scary intensity to his eyes that fifteen years seemingly had turned into weariness.

"What say you?" Crouch questioned Karkaroff.

"I can give you names of others if you allow me to avoid Azkaban." Karkaroff pleaded as though his life was on the line. Based upon the average life span of Azkaban prisoners, it most likely was.

"If the names are satisfactory then we shall consider your deal." Crouch said suspiciously as he glanced around the court room.

"Lestranger Rudolphus and Rabastan and the wife Bellatrix." Karkaroff listed.

Crouch shook his head and replied, *"We know this already. The Lestrangers are amongst the most synonymous of you-know-who's followers. In fact many believe Bellatrix Lestranger was only behind that traitor Black on the command ladder."*

"Severus Snape, he was in the dark lord's service." Karkaroff said hoarsely, feeling his life slipping away.

Dumbledore stood and said, *"I have repeatedly spoken on behalf of Severus Snape and his work as a spy. He is no more a deatheater than I am."*

Crouch nodded and turned to Karkaroff who was thinking frantically before he said, "Augustus Rookwood, Ludo Bagman....."

Crouch appeared interested and said, "Bagman has been proven to be an unwilling pawn, not a follower of the dark lord. Rookwood will require some time to verify. Is this all you have to offer, because it is not enough to spare you the walls of Azkaban."

Karkaroff was truly frantic now and suddenly his eyes lit up and he scanned the room before he said, "Barty Crouch Jr.!"

There was a collective gasp as Harry spotted Crouch Jr. scurrying towards an exit, but he was stopped by a perfect stunner from the younger Moody's wand.

Harry hadn't noticed earlier but this Moody had both of his legs, and both of his eyes by all appearances he was much healthier.

Crouch Jr. was placed into a pair of manacles as he screamed, "The dark lord will return and you all will be doomed."

Harry turned to find Dumbledore only to find the old wizard next to him as he said, "I believe that is enough for tonight." Dumbledore uttered a word in Latin that he couldn't quite make it, and just like before a cold feeling ran down his spine as they were pulled back out of the memory and onto their feet standing next to the pensieve.

Dumbledore smiled at Harry and said, "I believe that next week we shall watch more, so that we can have a discussion afterwards."

Harry smiled and asked, "Same time then Professor?" Dumbledore merely nodded as Harry turned his back and exited the office with Crouch Jr.'s final words still echoing in his head.

The following days went by quickly, with the only noticeable changes being the shift of the calendar into a new month, and Ron Weasley's return to near normalcy in Gryffindor house. Near normalcy because he had yet to speak to either Harry or Hermione, although at times it appeared he had desperately wanted to do so.

Harry and Dumbledore shared another meeting and this time they watched the trial of the Lestranges with the only thing Harry saying as they exited was, "Bellatrix LeStrange, sounds like she was quite the handful." Dumbledore merely arched his eyebrow and nodded before entering into a discussion about the structure and hierarchy of Voldemort and his followers.

It was a week from Valentine's Day and Hermione was in an interesting discussion with her bonded house elf Winky about the morality of slavery. Of course, Harry had taken the opportunity to talk with Dobby about something important also, but the repercussions of this conversation are better witnessed than discussed.

"Winky, surely you must understand that even if Witches and Wizards magic was needed to allow house elves to access their magic a more equitable situation can be made than out and out slavery." Hermione pleaded to the little elf.

Winky, who had undergone a tremendous transformation since being bonded taking on many of the bossier characteristics of her master, much to Dobby's chagrin. "Mistress Hermione, Winky is believing you is right. Winky is saying that elves be more worried about helping theirs master though."

Hermione sighed, she could understand Winky's logic, but it didn't mean that she had to like it one little bit. Placing herself in Winky's position, if all she had known was magic she would have a hard time turning away from it, even if it meant she would be enslaved. Of course she knew that house elves had been conditioned by their elders and other magic used to accept this reasoning, but that didn't mean it would always be that way, and she needed to work on her debating skills for a future when they would matter.

"Mistress Hermione be thinking hard again. Winky be needing to help make the food for later." Winky vanished with a soft pop; Hermione was still in deep thought, trying to find the one thing that would make her argument against elf slavery unbeatable.

The first meeting of the group named S.P.H.E.R.E was held the Saturday before Valentine's Day and had been heavily announced via flyer and word of mouth the preceding week. Of course it had also

been mentioned that Hermione Granger and Harry Potter were the co-founders in a shameless attempt to draw in more members.

Harry had to hide a smirk as the great hall played host to the first official meeting of the Society to Promote House Elf Rights and Education. Out of the assembled 25 people only two were wizards, Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom.

Hermione had mustered 9 girls from Gryffindor including herself. Five girls from Ravenclaw had arrived including Padma Patil; Hannah Abbot was the only representative of Hufflepuff house. To no one's surprise not a single Slytherin or Durmstrang student had shown, although Harry suspected that Viktor might have if the situations had been altered somewhat. The remainder of the group was led by Fleur Delacour, part magical being in her own right, and other girls from Beauxbatons that followed their champion's coattails religiously.

Hermione stood up and addressed the rest of the group, although many of the girls were whispering and sharing the occasional giggle as they looked at her...Harry. Hermione shook her head at the thought and began to speak, "Hello everyone and welcome to the first meeting for S.P.H.E.R.E. Today is merely an informational meeting and I believe Harry has some pamphlets to distribute that will help you."

Hermione glared at Harry, who was in his defense watching her intently, before he blinked and quickly handed out the pale blue pamphlets with magical pictures of abused house elves that Hermione had found in the library.

As the group gasped occasionally as they read through the pamphlet, Fleur raised her hand, and for the first time of the year had none of her usual haughtiness as she said, "Zis is a tragedy. In France house elves zat are abused are reassigned to new masters, and zere old masters are fined heavily."

Hermione nodded and said, "Yes that is true. Britain is behind the rest of the world in terms of magical creatures and their ethical treatment. However, it is important to note that any form of subservience where beings may be abused is unacceptable and repugnant to many people."

Fleur nodded thoughtfully, her grandmother had told her of dark times around the turn of the century when Veela were captured and used as prostitutes throughout all of Europe. The problems of abuse weren't so far removed from France to forget this.

Hermione looked around and spotting no more questions said, "Next meeting will be an official meeting involving the election of officers and possible fundraisers. The only goal Harry and I have set forth for the year is to buy some advertisement space in the Daily Prophet for an editorial on house elf treatment. However, I am very happy to see our sisters from Beauxbatons here and we may discuss having a sister organization of some sort there." The Beauxbatons girls all murmured some sort of agreement with the sentiment before Hermione smiled and said, "Very well then, I call this meeting adjourned. The next meeting will be announced when a time has been found. Feel free to bring friends to the next meeting."

The group quickly filed out leaving a relieved and happy looking Hermione now sitting next to Harry before she asked, "That went well didn't it?"

Harry turned to her and smiled warmly before he said, "Every little bit helps." Hermione nodded as she leaned her head against Harry's shoulder and they discussed plans for the next meeting.

By the time Harry had returned to Gryffindor tower Hedwig appeared in the small opening awaiting his arrival with a letter of some sort. Hedwig spotted her young wizard and swooped down to him as she landed gently on his shoulder. Harry untied the parchment from her leg before he rubbed her beak affectionately. Apparently satisfied with Harry's thanks Hedwig spread her wings and quickly rose back up and out of the small window, en route back to the owlery to await her next delivery.

Hermione had disappeared to the library on this particular Saturday evening for an Arithmancy study group with Ginny and some Ravenclaw girls. Unfurling the parchment Harry smiled as he read:

Harry,

We both just wanted to write and congratulate you on the grand display you plan on putting forth tomorrow in the great hall. Your father would no doubt be very proud, although he lacked the courage to try something so public for your mother until his seventh year when they were already officially a couple.

Call us on the mirror tomorrow night to tell us how it goes. May Merlin be with you.

Messrs. Moony and Padfoot

Valentine's Day had begun quietly enough for Hermione, although she had been disappointed when Harry had been missing long before she had come down from bed. One of the fortunate aspects of the holiday falling on a Sunday was that there would be no embarrassing deliveries of flowers or chocolate during any classes. Hermione had never received a proper Valentine's card, and she desperately hoped Harry's absence meant he had something planned.

It was lunch and Hermione's disappointment had faded into worry as Harry had still yet to make an appearance. As she sat down in the great hall, it was indeed a strange Sunday as many couples were treading the line on public displays of affection as Valentine's gifts and cards were handed out. However, the entire great hall grew quiet as an enchanted trumpet sounded and the doors to the great hall swung open to reveal Dobby dressed in a cupid outfit with Harry trailing behind dressed in an outfit straight out of a fairy tale.

Dobby stopped short of Hermione, whose face was flushed with embarrassment, although she also looked distinctly pleased as Harry cleared his throat loudly and intoned with feeling:

Her Locks are vivacious and the color of Honey

Her smile is like the sunrise and makes my stomach feel funny

(Several in the hall snorted as Harry unabashedly shrugged before continuing)

So for this day of love all I can offer is this

The tip of cupid's arrow (Dobby obediently poked Hermione gently in the arm with his heart tipped arrow, much to the giggles of several girls) *and maybe a kiss*

Harry leaned in as he finished and gave Hermione a chaste kiss on the lips, the first kiss of her life that she hadn't initiated, as the great hall burst into laughs and applause at his small show.

Harry turned to Dobby with a smile and said, "You were brilliant Dobby thanks." Dobby nodded before he vanished with a soft pop as the hall quieted into conversations between the various houses and schools about Harry Potter's stunt on Valentine's Day.

Harry was still dressed in his outfit as he began to serve himself some of the mashed potatoes on the table and rolls. He turned to Hermione with a smile and said, "I have some gifts for you when we get back to the common room."

Hermione blushed and let out an involuntarily girlish giggle before she said, "That was sweet Harry, thank you."

Harry chuckled before he leaned in, and with a conspiratorial whisper said, "I'm glad you liked it. But don't be surprised to see Dobby walking around in his costume for awhile. He rather seemed to like it." Hermione rolled her eyes as she socked his arm playfully, feeling ridiculously happy for the remainder of the day.

A/N: I know I mentioned the second task, but this seemed the perfect place to end the chapter. Next chapter, which should be out by Friday, will include a brief vision from Voldemort, the second task (which has some interesting twists mixed in with some familiar events), and a realization on everyone's favorite resident reporter.

Thanks to all of you that have reviewed, and please keep reading.

As for my question at the end of the chapter, which as always I welcome, and will attempt to respond to:

In what major way, does Harry's childhood differ from Voldemort's that would explain why they are opposed to each other?

This question has a few intriguing possibilities and I look forward to the creative answers you can come up with.

Chapter 13

The day of the second task dawned a clear but cold late February morning. Seeing as how it was a Wednesday, the champions had the option of choosing to attend classes in the morning, or not to. Harry ultimately decided to attend the one class he had that day, although he was without Hermione's presence given that she had been 'taken' the previous night by Professor McGonagall.

Therefore it had come as quite the surprise when he was joined at his usual table near the front, by one Ron Weasley. Ron had muttered a subdued, "Hey Harry." Before lapsing into silence for the entirety of Flitwick's lecture.

As the class ended Ron sighed and with a little more feeling said, "Erm good luck in the second task."

Harry smiled and nodded before he glanced at his watch and said, "Thanks mate." Harry frowned imperceptibly and added, "I need to get going now that you mention it." Ron nodded and felt a little bit lighter than he had in two months.

Harry returned to his room and attached his thigh wand holster to the outside of his swim trunks, before he grabbed the Gillyweed Dobby had gotten him a couple of weeks earlier. Glancing at his watch Harry sighed before he realized he only had twenty five minutes until the task was to begin. He slammed his trunk shut and placed his typical locking charms on it before dashing out of the portrait hole and down the stairs en route the lake and the second task.

Harry managed to reach the champion's platform and dock on the great lake with fifteen minutes to spare. Glancing around he waved to Remus, who was only about twenty five feet away discussing something with Professor McGonagall. Remus waved and gave him a reassuring smile before he turned back to his discussion with McGonagall.

Harry sighed as he looked around before he was broken from his nervous thoughts when Cedric said, "Hey Harry, are you ready for this?"

Harry put an *impervius* and sticking charm on his glasses before he replied, "Well, as ready as anyone can be I suppose; How about you?"

Cedric shrugged and replied, "I reckon if I'm not ready at this point, then I never will be. After all what's the worst they can do to us underwater, send Grindylows and merpeople at us?"

Harry smirked and added, "Don't forget the giant squid. I'm sure he can be quite nasty given the proper motivation."

Cedric paled as he considered this little detail, before he shook his head and said, "I don't think any of us could get past a giant squid underwater."

Harry smiled and replied, "I knew that, but I liked seeing you sweat for once."

Cedric glanced down at his watch chuckling nervously before he said, "I reckon you didn't see me before the first task then."

Harry was about to reply when Ludo Bagman walked up them and said, "Mr. Potter, a word if you please."

Harry sighed in question before Cedric nodded, and he turned towards Bagman who was still looking nervous, and unlike last time it appeared he was also missing some sleep if the bags under his eyes were any indication. Bagman spoke quickly, "I just wanted to suggest that you use the bubblehead charm for the task."

Harry shook his head before he rolled his eyes and replied, "Mr. Bagman, I really can't deal with this right now."

Apparently a few people had been listening in on the conversation as Barty Crouch Sr. walked up and said, "Bagman, leave Mr. Potter alone. He has quite enough to get on with today without your blathering."

Crouch turned to Harry and said, "Good luck today Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled and said, "Thank you sir."

Crouch nodded in response and walked back over to the other headmasters, as Bagman stalked off to his announcing stand to prepare for the task. Harry shook his head and began to work down a checklist of things he needed to worry about as Remus walked up to him and said, "Hello Harry."

Harry ran a hand through his hair and replied, "Hello Remus, bring Snuffles with you today?"

Remus smiled and said, "Ah yes, Hagrid is giving him a good rubbing at the moment."

Harry chuckled and said, "I'm sure the poor old dog will need a soak after that."

Remus' eyes danced with mirth before he mellowed some and asked, "Are you quite sure, that you're prepared?"

Harry leaned in closely and said, "I have Gillyweed and if that runs out I can cast a bubblehead charm underwater. I've worked on my non-verbal casting so I can manage a stunner, a cutting hex, and a *lumos* without any difficulty. Anything more will be by the seat of my pants."

Remus sighed but did appear heartened as he said, "Good to see you're taking this seriously. Snuffles and I had wondered if you'd only been working on wooing Ms. Granger outside of classes."

Harry blushed and softly replied, "That is an ongoing process I'm afraid." Turning his eyes upward he locked gazes with Remus and said, "I'll be able to explain everything else more thoroughly this summer."

Remus sighed but nodded, before he surprised Harry as he gave him a brief hug and said, "Good luck out there Harry." Harry smiled and waved as Remus walked back to the guest's platform to leave Harry for the remainder of his preparations.

Working on keeping his breathing slow and calm Harry glanced around the other platforms and was surprised to see Ron and Neville at the front with a banner that said *Potter for Champion*. With a small

smile he heard Bagman begin his introductions, "Welcome everyone to today's meeting for the second task of the All-Europe Tri-Wizard championship."

A few people could be hear screaming for the various champions as he continued, "Today's challenge will be a test of the champion's mettle as they must dive deep into the depths of the lake to rescue something of great importance. They must rescue their most precious treasure under the allotted hour to complete the task. Points will be awarded for unique and novel solutions to the challenges the lake will present."

Bagman turned to the champions and said, "At the sound of the gun, your one hour will begin."

Harry put the Gillyweed to his mouth as the gunshot rang out into the clear February sky. Stuffing the slimy plant into his mouth, Harry was careful not to chew it as he swallowed it down in two gagging gulps. Harry dove into the water, the other champions had already disappeared into the depths as he felt his fingers become webbed and gills appear on his neck. With a prayer to the heavens he kicked his legs and became completely submerged in the dark depths of the lake.

Lighting the tip of his wand Harry dove deeper and deeper until he finally could see the faint outlines of Viktor, Cedric, and Fleur reaching a thick growth of seaweed. Harry continued to close in on the others until he could see Fleur being swarmed by Grindylows as they stripped her of her wand and pulled her into growth, the French girl managing one last desperate scream before disappearing completely.

Harry frowned, realizing that while it was unlikely that Dumbledore would allow anyone to die in the tournament it had happened in past tournaments and it was a risk he wasn't willing to take. Harry looked for a thin spot in the seaweed before swimming at full speed into the growth, being careful to pocket his wand and avoid the same fate as Fleur.

By some quirk of fate the Grindylows still appeared to be quite busy with Fleur and Harry passed into a clearing, now only twenty yards

behind Krum and Cedric, who were jostling with one another for position as they swam. Harry took a deep breath, or er gulp, of water and kicked it into another gear as he closed in on and passed Cedric and Krum and he followed the occasional magical flag signaling the path they had to follow.

Soon a shipwreck came into view in the depths and Harry glanced down at his watch, realizing it had already been a half an hour and he hadn't even seen the hostages yet. Shaking his head with determination Harry put a larger gap between himself and the other two remaining contestants as he dolphin kicked over the shipwreck, with the welcome sight of the hostages floating in the distance.

Harry's heart clenched as he spotted the four hostages chained to rocks, in some sort of deep sleep with an air bubble escaping their lips every minute or so, but no water coming in. Harry floated up to Hermione and cast a quick nonverbal cutting hex on the chain before he grabbed it and began to float over towards the young blonde girl that was obviously Fleur's hostage. Harry could see the merpeople began to stir as he neared the young girl. Glancing back to see Krum and Cedric coming into view Harry once again prayed to the gods as he cut the young girls chain and grabbed it as he began to furiously kick for the surface.

Dragging two hostages was not an advantage when trying to out swim a group of merpeople wielding sharp tridents and rocks as weapons Harry snidely thought to himself. The daylight of the surface came into view as Harry continued to furiously kick his legs in an attempt to beat the merpeople to the surface.

Just as he was certain he had managed to succeed Harry felt a sharp stab into his left arm, and with a glance could see the embedded forks of a trident buried deep into his flesh. The merman responsible roared at Harry viciously and began to twist the trident deeper into his sinews.

Harry let out a gurgled scream before he pulled his wand back out and cast a cutting hex, separating the merman from his arm. The other merpeople scattered at the injury as the trident twisted away and Harry's vision grayed at the intense pain in his arm. The blood

was floating out of his heavily damaged arm as Harry switched hands and put both chains in his uninjured hand and began to kick his legs once again.

Every movement became weaker as the light intensified, and Harry and the two girls surfaced to the roars of the crowd. Feeling his vision gray again, Harry released the girls and let the darkness take hold as he passed out from a combination of pain and blood loss.

Remus had been amongst the others in the initial cheers, but as soon as he saw Harry's eyes close he took four bounding steps and he dove into the lake attempting to retrieve the young man, who was the closest he had to family, save Sirius. Remus could smell the blood in the water, thanks to his lycanthropy as he gingerly grabbed the boy and kicked to the surface, taking care to not touch Harry's wounded arm.

As he resurfaced a scream from his left signified him to Hermione's presence, as he pulled Harry towards the dock. Madam Pomfrey used a flotation charm to set him down onto a stretcher to prevent further damage. Remus was waterlogged in his heavy wool clothes and feeling slightly breathless before he was pulled from the water by a pair of small but strong hands. Taking a few heaving breaths he looked up to see the same young woman he had met for the first time in Will Hardison's office all those months ago. Now however, she was dressed in the royal blue dress uniform of the auror squads, apparently having already graduated.

As he was about to thank the young woman, he remembered Harry and scrambled over to the stretcher as he watched Madam Pomfrey clean the unconscious Gryffindor's torn flesh out. A moment later she began to suture the gaping wound closed with various healing charms.

Hermione was sobbing something that sounded like Harry's name a few feet away, before Remus' hearing went away until all he could hear was his own heartbeat, as he looked down at the pale visage of Harry. It was the same feeling he had experienced when told of James and Lily's deaths that Halloween night so long ago.

As if his ears had been plugged with water, his hearing returned with a rush of air and he heard Madam Pomfrey say, "He should be fine now, he'll just need some blood replenishing potions and a bit of bed rest for the next couple of days."

Madam Pomfrey pulled a vial of Pepper-up potion mixed with a pain relief potion and said, "I believe Mr. Potter would like to see the remainder of the event before he is transported to the hospital wing and treated further."

Forcing the potion down Harry's throat his face became flushed as steam vented from his ears, slowly cracking his eyes open blearily. Opening his mouth he weakly asked, "W-what happened?"

Hermione sniffed and leaned in to give Harry a deep kiss fraught with emotion before she tearfully replied, "You were stabbed by something, and you passed out as you reached the surface. Remus dove in and pulled you out before you could sink too far."

After one more prolonged sniff she continued, "Madam Pomfrey gave you a potion to cancel out your Gillyweed and then she healed your arm and woke you up to watch the rest of task."

Harry blinked before he said, "Yeah...there was a merman who stabbed a trident in my arm." Hermione sniffed again as she leaned her forehead against his.

She thickly said, "You really need to stop this scare Hermione nonsense. You're making me all weepy."

Harry smiled weakly and said, "Sorry bout that." Hermione giggled tearfully in response.

Remus crouched down next to Harry as Snuffles licked his hand and he said, "You scared us out there Harry."

Harry merely nodded as Remus squeezed his hand before he stood and walked a few feet away to talk to the young woman who had pulled him from the water.

Remus walked up to the young auror and said, "Thank you for your help, Ms. Tonks; Congratulations on your appointment to the auror squad as well."

Tonks blushed lightly and said, "Your welcome Mr. Lupin." Her brow furrowed into concern as she asked, "How is Harry?"

Remus glanced over to see Hermione with her arms wrapped around Harry, as he weakly chuckled at something she had said. Remus smiled softly and said, "I believe he is in the best of hands." He turned to Tonks looking her straight in the eye and said, "As always a pleasure making your acquaintance Ms. Tonks. I do so hope we may meet again." Tonks blushed and nodded, as her attraction for Remus from months ago, was rekindled with hope for the future.

As Hermione continued to fuss over Harry, they heard a roar as Cedric surfaced with Cho in his arms as his bubblehead charm was still in place. Canceling the charm they were both pulled from the water as Madam Pomfrey bustled over and did a quick diagnostic spell, which revealed no injuries. She nodded and bustled back over to Harry to check his pulse and heart rate to make certain he would be fine through the end of the task.

Cedric glanced over at Harry on the stretcher as he absently asked, "I wonder what happened to Harry?"

Ernie McMillan was the nearest Hufflepuff, as he had been aiding Madam Pomfrey, replied, "Oh Potter had a right nasty gash in his arm from saving his and Delacoe's most precious treasures. Madam Pomfrey fixed him right up though; she'll probably have him stay overnight tonight but he should be right as rain by tomorrow." Cedric frowned in concerned over Harry, as he had grown rather fond of the younger boy from their Quidditch matches and their shared kinship in the tournament this year.

If Cedric was concerned, Ron and the other Gryffindors were sick with worry as they watched their literal and figurative champion, severely injured and unconscious as he was pulled from the water. In many ways it was a repeat of the previous year and the Quidditch match with Hufflepuff as the battered and bloodied body of Harry was scurried back to the castle on a stretched. Of course, that instance

Ron had been forced to console Hermione as she tearfully pleaded to be allowed into the hospital wing to see her friend. Today Harry was fortunately well enough to be awoken so that he could watch the rest of the task and get his score.

A brief pang of pity hit Ron again as he thought of Hermione, who he could see had already kissed Harry desperately when he came to and now was clinging to him tightly, before he shook it off and turned to the other Gryffindors and said, "Alright you lot, who all is coming with me to wait outside of the hospital wing for Harry once this mess is over." A roar from the crowd stopped them as they looked down to see the final champion pulled from the water more or less completely intact.

Harry and Hermione were still clinging together in their thick towels as they heard Fleur's voice call out, "Oh 'Arry you have zaved my zister."

Harry turned towards the voice only to be greeted with a kiss on each of his cheeks and a final kiss on his forehead as she added, "I was zo worried, and you zaved her. You zaved my sister Gabrielle. Zank you 'Arry."

Harry merely nodded bemusedly before he turned to Hermione who had turned her death glare on the retreating French girl's back. Harry never noticed Hermione frowning as she pulled a beetle from her hair and closed her hand around it as an incredulous expression crossed her face. She quickly covered her thoughts with a mask of worry that she had worn often enough during her friendship with Harry.

Finally, Krum surfaced with his date from the Yule ball, although his head and shoulders had been transfigured into a shark's head. With a flick of his own wand Krum's head slowly returned to normal as he was pulled onto the dock. The task was finished and now the crowd waited for the announcement of scores.

The Gryffindors began to file down the stairs of their platform as Bagman announced, "After some debate from the various judges, the scores for the second task will be Mr. Harry Potter with the maximum of fifty points for an outstanding combination of moral fiber and magical prowess, in using Gillyweed to rescue not only his hostage

but Ms. Delacoer's as well." The crowd was unified in its cheers aside from a small section of Slytherins who managed a weak "boo".

Bagman continued amongst the noise, "Mr. Cedric Diggory will be awarded forty points for finishing second although he was one minute over the one hour requirement. Mr. Diggory used the bubblehead charm to rescue his hostage." Harry managed a weak clap as the Hogwarts contingent went crazy for their official champion.

Bagman took a deep breath before he continued, "Mr. Viktor Krum will be awarded thirty-seven points for his usage of an incomplete transfiguration to rescue his hostage five minutes over the limit." Cheers of "*Krum*" echoed through the Durmstrang contingent.

Bagman finished, "Finally, Ms. Fleur Delacoer was incapacitated by the Grindylows, but she will be awarded twenty five points for her advanced transfiguration of a rock into a snorkel in combination with a bubblehead charm. The final task will be held June 24th at Hogwarts. More details will become available as we draw nearer to the event."

Hermione was beaming with pride as she turned to Harry to congratulate him. Harry meanwhile was beginning to come down from the pepper-up induced rush of energy, and felt like he wanted to fall asleep for a nice long nap.

Hermione smiled softly as she placed the beetle in one of her pockets on her jumper before zipping it up. She leaned in and murmured, "Go ahead and sleep Harry, we can talk when you wake up." Harry blinked once owlishly before his eyes fluttered closed, a small smile covering his face.

Remus and Snuffles had at this point walked over to Hermione and Harry just as Madam Pomfrey began to levitate the stretcher and walking back to the castle. Hermione turned and murmured to Remus, "Can you conjure a glass jar with a lid for me please?"

Remus blinked but complied as he conjured a moderately sized glass jar with a screw on lid, much like the ones he remembered filled with jam from his family's orchards as a young boy. Hermione smiled and took the lid off before depositing the oddly colored beetle from her

hand. Remus' eyes widened as he asked, "Hermione what exactly are you doing?"

Hermione covered the jar with her hand and held it as she carefully poked some small holes in the lid before quickly screwing the lid back on. She smiled and nodded to herself before she quietly said, "I have reason to believe that this oddly colored beetle is an illegal animagus."

Remus' brow furrowed as he puzzled out the circumstances of the year before he ruefully concluded, "Rita Skeeter I presume."

Hermione nodded with a feral grin as she tapped her finger on the jar, which only agitated the beetle inside as he bounced off of the walls of its glass prison. Hermione's expression was gleeful as she cast a strengthening charm on the glass and said, "I should think that will hinder any thoughts of a premature escape." A smirk covered her face as they walked into the castle and she said, "Fly to the top of the jar if you understand you're in a world of shite." The beetle flew to the top before fluttering back down to the bottom of the jar.

Remus and Snuffles watched as they neared the hospital wing and Hermione's byplay with the beetle continued, "You know Rita, I would have let your articles slide, but two of my dearest friends were hurt as a result of your lies. I know an article about the muggleborn friend of Harry Potter would never be printed, but now that we have you under lid so to speak, I think we will have a meeting of the minds. Soon, but not now I have to make sure Harry is alright first."

Although it pained her to do so Hermione called out, "Winky."

Winky appeared with a soft pop and Hermione sighed before she said; "Could you place this jar and the beetle in my trunk. Oh and Winky please replace the locking charms on it before you leave thank you." The little elf obediently took the jar and vanished with a pop.

Remus smiled as they entered the hospital wing and said, "Harry said you each had personal house elves, but I guess seeing is believing."

Hermione sighed as she watched Madam Pomfrey place Harry in his usual bed before she turned to the two humans and dog before she

said, "I expect you know enough to allow him to sleep. Please make sure any other visitors know this as well."

Remus and Snuffles walked over to Harry's bedside and with a sigh they turned to Hermione as Remus said, "We really should be going, before anyone questions as to why a grim is in the hospital wing." Hermione smiled softly as she settled into her seat next to the bed and as Remus walked out of the hospital wing he turned with a smile and said, "Take care of him will you?"

Hermione smiled and quietly replied, "I always do." Remus merely nodded as Snuffles barked his thanks and they walked back out of the swinging doors.

Hermione's short period of quiet was broken when she heard a large group approaching the wing, due to several raucous shouts and laughs. She was therefore surprised when she heard Ron's voice break above the noise and say, "Oy you lot; only those that Harry considers close friends should go in."

A younger girl, shouted, "Oh like you're a close friend now Weasley."

Ron tiredly replied, "Yeah well, I know Harry is probably going to tell me to stuff it, but he was and hopefully will be again, my best mate. The twins have adopted Harry like a little brother, and Ginny and Neville have stuck with him all year, even when I've been too much of a prat to do the same. So just please...."

Hermione remained completely still and impassive as she watched the Weasley siblings and Neville slowly enter the hospital wing, anxiously scanning the wing for a sign of Harry. Clearing the final curtain that Hermione had been watching from the edge of, they saw Harry, as he appeared to be resting peacefully with Hermione dutifully sitting by his side.

Ron swallowed heavily in anticipation for the first of two very difficult conversations as they all clustered around Harry's bed. He awkwardly began, "Hey Hermione."

Hermione looked up and softly acknowledged, "Ron."

The others suddenly realized that something very private was about to take place so Ginny said, "We'll be back after dinner." She turned to the twins and said, "Come on you two."

Neville was already obediently walking away before he turned to Hermione and said, "If he wakes up while we're gone will you tell him, we thought he was brilliant today." Hermione smiled and nodded as the other four left the wing.

Ron smiled weakly and said, "You know, I've had more epiphanies in the hospital wing than everywhere else in the world combined."

Hermione smiled and said, "Yes, this place does tend to have that sort of effect on people."

Ron continued his train of thought, "First year after the stone I realized what it meant to be Harry Potter's friend. Second year after Harry's arm was deboned I realized that Lockhart was an even bigger git than I had first thought."

Hermione giggled and said, "Yes, me too."

Ron rolled his eyes and playfully said, "Yeah, but I never fancied the git."

Hermione flushed and with a grin he continued, "Later that year, when we first saw you petrified I realized how much Harry and I took you for granted. Then afterwards from how often Harry visited you, I realized that no matter how hard I tried, it would always be a duo plus one for the rest of our time as friends."

Hermione went to speak and Ron silenced her with a grin and said, "No, trust me I get it now. I didn't back then, but I do now."

Ron sighed and said, "Third year, after Harry fell from his broom from the dementors. I could tell then and there that you would be the future Mrs. Potter. I mean I was really worried about him, but you.....you were broken, terrified, and horrified rolled all into one."

Hermione cast her eyes back to Harry but nodded as he sighed and continued, "Then the whole time turner thing. I mean you two still

haven't told me much about that, but when I saw you two vanish I had that second where I realized that I could support Harry in the future, but I could never be the thing he counted on most."

Hermione nodded before she frowned and asked, "How about now Ron, what do you understand now?"

Ron cleared his throat anxiously and said, "Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror one day and suddenly realized that you didn't like the person looking back at you?"

Hermione smiled softly and replied, "Well with enchanted mirrors and my hair it happens quite frequently actually."

Ron chuckled weakly and said, "Right then, but the person looking back in the mirror was me this time."

Hermione nodded as she gazed down at Harry's face and Ron continued, "It was strange you know; it's not like I'm the kind of bloke that takes a lot of time to really find out who I am and what I'm feeling from day to day."

Hermione snorted softly as Ron soldiered on, "You see, the person I've become since the whole chamber of secrets thing, was petty, stupid, and jealous."

Hermione turned to Ron and they locked gazes as he continued, "So I had to ask myself; why did I begin to change then?"

Hermione quietly asked, "What did you figure out?"

Ron's ears tinged with red and he replied, "I think that when Harry pulled Ginny out of the chamber instead of me, I was jealous of Harry for the first time. I mean I'm her older brother and was the closest one in our family to her growing up, and I should have been the one to save her. It's stupid I know, but it was how I felt."

After a short silence Ron sighed and continued, "Last year, I was so messed up I took a lot of that out on you. This year I've been taking it out on Harry, and I realized I didn't like myself like this."

Hermione nodded as she began to run her fingers through Harry's hair and asked, "So what are you going to do then?"

Ron sighed and said, "I reckon I should apologize for being a prat, and then let my actions speak for themselves."

Hermione glanced back down at Harry's face; he was now sporting a soft smile from the machinations of her gentle fingers before she asked, "What was the ball about Ron?"

Ron flushed a little and he muttered, "I was jealous because Harry had the best date at the ball."

Hermione let out a breath and questioningly said, "Jealousy can only explain so much Ron."

Neither noticed as Harry's eyes cracked opened and he heard Ron's response, "When Harry dressed me down, I think it was when I finally registered something like pity for myself. That next morning, I went for a walk and I realized it for the first time since the chamber of secrets. While Harry has a lot of things, it doesn't give me a reason to be jealous. I mean I know what you and Harry have had to deal with since you entered this world, and on top of that Harry grew up an orphan with those horrid muggles. It was at that moment that one of those muggle light berbs went off in my head."

Hermione smiled slightly and interrupted, "It's called a light bulb Ronald."

Ron waved his hand and dismissed it as unimportant as he continued, "The point is that I consciously realized it for the first time. Since then I've been thinking and I realized, all I can do with my life is make the best of the hand I was dealt, and that nothing can be helped by feeling sorry for myself."

Hermione was about to reply when Harry quietly said, "Took you bloody well long enough mate."

Hermione's hand froze as she looked down at the face of waking Harry Potter as he smiled at her before turning back to Ron. Harry

sighed and said, "I'm not going to lie to you mate, our friendship will never be the same as it was before."

Ron nodded sullenly as Harry continued, "But, I learned while I was growing up with the Dursleys that broken bones will heal into something stronger than they were before." Hermione's eyes narrowed at the implications as Harry continued, "Give us time mate, and we can heal this and make it stronger than before."

Ron looked down into his hands, as fought to find some strength, before he looked up with a slight smile and said, "Right then, I'm...I'll just leave you two to it then."

Ron didn't spare a glance backwards as he exited the hospital wing walking straighter than he had for a few months. As they heard the swinging doors of the entrance open and close Hermione turned to Harry and asked, "So the merman stabbed your arm, then what happened?"

Harry blinked in surprise before he replied, "Erm, I used a cutting hex that took the arm off of the merman that had stabbed me. I pulled the trident out and struggled the rest of the way to the surface. I think that was when I passed out."

Hermione sighed but nodded as she said, "I found out how Rita Skeeter has been getting all of those stories."

Harry arched an eyebrow in interest and asked, "Oh?"

Hermione smiled smugly and said, "She's an animagus."

Harry furrowed his brow and asked, "What was her form? I mean I'm pretty sure I would have noticed a stray cat in the tent."

Hermione's smile only broadened as she replied, "She's a beetle."

Harry laughed in disbelief and replied, "A beetle!"

"I found her in my hair as we watched Viktor finish the task. I realized that there was no way a beetle could be that active in February. So I

held her in my hand until Remus could conjure a jar for me. Oh Harry, I wish you could have seen it.” Hermione excitedly rambled.

Harry nodded, before he grinned evilly and asked, “So what are you going to do with her?”

Hermione crooked her eyebrow with amusement and replied, “I don’t know yet. But, I’m sure I can find something appropriate.”

A/N: Ah so there it is, the new second task. I didn’t go into excessive detail or anything, but I hope the changes were acceptable. Remember Harry is a hero, so even if he is more cautious and observant, it doesn’t mean he would take the chance with someone’s life.

Once again I was amazed by the diversity of the answers to the Question I posed. By all appearances, people like having the question at the end of the chapter so I have another for you today.

Draco Malfoy, does his hesitation and ultimate failure to kill Dumbledore make him a redeemable character in book 7? Any and all comers are welcome to answer.

Chapter 14

After a short visit by the Weasleys and Neville after dinner, Harry and Hermione were left alone to talk in more detail about the second task and their first step towards reconciliation with Ron.

Hermione frowned and asked, "Do you think Ron meant what he said?"

Playing absently with the sheet on his bed Harry replied, "It's not like Ron is the type to bare his soul often or anything. But, like you mentioned he said, let's just leave his actions to do the most important talking."

Hermione nodded and was about to move on to Rita Skeeter business when the sound of the swinging of the ward door signaled them to another visitor. Dumbledore walked into view and while he was sporting a small smile, anyone who knew him could see he was a little perturbed about something. Upon spotting the more or less royal couple of Gryffindor house he smiled and said, "Ah Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger, may I have a moment of your time?"

Harry and Hermione shared a look before she replied, "Of course sir."

Dumbledore conjured a comfortable looking chintz lounging chair before sitting down with relish. Harry and Hermione shared an amused look before Dumbledore began to speak, "I wish to discuss the events that led to your current situation. Namely, the merman that attacked you, and by all accounts you dispatched of."

Harry nodded hesitantly and Dumbledore smiled before he added, "You may not have been aware, but the merpeople were only supposed to threaten with force, not actually use it as such."

Harry shrugged and Dumbledore continued, "Be that as it may, the merman that did attack you and lost his right arm from the elbow down has a common but tragic story and reason for his actions."

Harry still looked reasonably confused; while Hermione had a thoughtful look on her face as they listened to Dumbledore continue.

“Merpeople have been often exploited by wizard treasure hunters, because of the merpeople’s disposition to find shiny and valuable objects in the depths of the waters they inhabit; other times merchildren are kidnapped and raised by witches and wizards to seek out such things. The merman who stabbed you lost two children and his wife was killed in such an endeavor.”

Hermione gasped as Dumbledore nodded sadly, “So you see, this merman left his community and joined the one here at Hogwarts, over a year ago. There had been no indications that he still harbored such anger towards wizards until his attack upon your person today. The merchieftain and his council have agreed that the loss of his arm was proper recompense for his attack, and no further actions upon Harry have been requested. Do you have any questions?”

Harry ran a tired hand through his hair before he asked, “Are there cases of such blatant abuse for every magical race?”

Dumbledore sighed heavily before he responded, “It is a common practice on all magical races aside from vampires, yes.”

Harry and Hermione both nodded thoughtfully as Dumbledore gave Harry his best wishes before exiting with a promise to pick up their training sessions the following week.

Watching Dumbledore’s retreating back Hermione softly said, “While that was highly informative it wasn’t all that enlightening. However, I think our discussion of our favorite bug reporter will be enjoyable.”

Harry merely smirked in response and Hermione said, “I think we need to find a way to put an end to her animagus abilities.”

Harry frowned and replied, “I agree that she can’t be allowed to sneak around anymore, but taking away a talent like that isn’t the best way to go about it.”

Hermione looked at Harry questioningly and he explained, “I think it would be more suiting if you could somehow tie her transformations to something negative in her human form.”

Hermione furrowed her brow in thought for a long moment before she replied, "I might be able to manage something like that, but I need to do a lot of research on it first. You're right of course; taking away her ability would only motivate her to single us out even more."

Harry smiled at her and said, "If anyone can figure it out Hermione, it's you." Hermione couldn't help but blush at Harry's ringing endorsement.

It was truly amazing; the entire environment in Gryffindor house seemed to come alive with news that a beginning to mend the golden trio's friendship had started. Ron was no longer listlessly wandering the castle with his free time, and the other two friends were smiling at lot more and even managing to laugh occasionally.

Unfortunately, several less than welcome things came from the events the day of the second task. The legend that was the boy-who-lived only grew, which meant even more unwanted attention from suitors. It had gotten so out of hand; Harry had the mortifying experience of being propositioned by a howler from a gay admirer. Somehow the angry words of the admirer were spoken in possessive manner that conveyed the feelings. Whatever it was, Harry knew he would be having nightmares for a long time to come.

March 1st came and with it Ron's 15th birthday. It was also the time for the second part of Ron's gifts, which would make his Christmas present something he could actually use. In an eerily similar scene to one from the prior year, an owl flew into the great hall carrying the telltale long package wrapped in brown paper. This time however, the broom was dropped in front of one Ronald Weasley instead of Harry Potter.

Ron gaped for a moment, quickly realizing his parents hadn't the gold for such a present and the eager smile on Harry's face told him all he needed to know. Normally, Ron's pride would prevent him from accepting such an expensive gift, but with time Ron had begin to realize that Harry spent money because he wanted to show his friends how important they were to him. Telling his pride that fact was a fair amount more difficult, but he was getting used to it.

Ron was startled from his thoughts as Harry said with a grin, "Go on read the card and then open it."

The card had merely read *Happy 15th Birthday Mate, Harry*

Casting a mischievous grin to Hermione he added, "This one is from me, I swear."

Hermione pouted good naturedly at Harry, well aware he was only teasing her about the Firebolt fiasco from the previous year. Ron rolled his eyes at the pair, understanding that they were in their silent communication mode as he began to untie the binding holding the paper in place.

Most of the great hall was watching with rapt attention as Ron pulled the paper away to reveal a broom that rivaled almost every on the market aside from the Firebolt, a cleansweep 11. In a way a Firebolt wasn't a practical broom for a keeper, with its insane acceleration. The very good acceleration of the cleansweep being 0-70 mph in only ten seconds was ample for the keeper position, which Ron had designs on trying out for in the coming school year.

Blinking away his excitement he turned to Harry and said, "Erm thanks a lot mate, this is really brilliant."

Harry merely smiled and replied, "Yeah, we'll have to go out and test her out this weekend. Think you can wait until then?"

Ron wrung his hands together like Dobby; it was only Monday after all, and now Harry was telling him to wait four days to use his new broom. *Life truly wasn't fair sometimes!* After a moment he managed a rueful grin and replied, "Yeah mate I think I can manage."

By Thursday the schools had settled into a strange comfort level, with students previously not getting along now just content to live and let live. The best part about this particular day was that the dueling club would be meeting following dinner.

However, first they had to survive Defense with Moody, as today he was teaching counter jinxes from his own dueling books. While things were on the road to recovery for the trio, little things like Ron's

absence from the dueling club highlighted that a rift had existed at one point in the year. Other things like Ron's precipitous drop in his marks without the nagging of Hermione to spur him on, well those had a longer lasting effect.

Moody stomped into the defense classroom, his eye swiveling around haphazardly until it locked on to the first of his volunteers for the day, and surprise member of the dueling club, Draco Malfoy.

"Mr. Malfoy, perhaps you could come forward today and aid me in a demonstration as to the use of counter-jinxes to disarm and subdue a practitioner of the dark arts." Malfoy grumbled for a moment before he walked up to the front next to Moody.

Moody grunted his acknowledgement before he turned to the class, "Simple spells such as the disarming hex or the stunning hex can be easily blocked. But dark wizards and witches, well they use things a mite nastier than that I'll tell ya."

Moody noticed Hermione had raised her hand in question and with a nod she asked, "Professor, what is the difference between a counter-jinx and jinx?"

"A counter-jinx is an offensive response when typically a defensive method would be attempted. I've found that by responding n attack with one of your own; you win more often than by casting a shield charm. Also, as we've already discussed a shield can't stop an unforgivable curse, and dark wizards tend to be very fond of them." Moody managed a short glance at Malfoy as he used the words dark wizard.

Finally, turning his attention to Malfoy he said, "Mr. Malfoy I want you to use your marbles when selecting the curse to throw at me. I promise that anything I send you will not do any permanent damage." Malfoy nodded as his upper lip twisted into a sneer.

Pacing off the necessary steps for safety's sake, Malfoy raised his wand and uttered, "*reducto*". A blue wave of energy surged towards Moody who merely ducked with his wand already waving as he said, "*stupefy*" and a red beam hit Malfoy in the middle of his disbelieving eyes, which promptly snapped shut as he was rendered unconscious.

Moody nodded to himself before he turned to the class, "Now which of you can tell me the advantages to what I just did?"

Looking around he spotted several hands before selecting, "Longbottom."

Neville gulped and answered, "You were already aiming and starting the spell as he completed his spell sir."

"Good point lad. Anyone with other observations?"

With a nod Harry answered, "In addition to having an advantage on the next spell, you can also dodge the curse, because you're looking right at your opponent."

Moody grunted, "That's another good point Potter. Now let's revive Mr. Malfoy, so that we can demonstrate once more."

Moody walked over to Draco's motionless body and muttered, "*Rennervate*" as Malfoy's eyes fluttered open before they narrowed almost immediately. Malfoy quickly jumped to his feet and reassumed his haughty air.

Moody chuckled at Malfoy's antics before addressing the class, "Mr. Malfoy, did exactly as I expected with our first trading of spells. I'd like to award Slytherin ten points and Gryffindor ten points for Potter and Longbottom's observations." Turning back to Malfoy he simply added, "If you'd like to try your hand one more time Mr. Malfoy."

Malfoy pursed his lips in thought before nodding as they once again paced off the necessary distance, Moody awaiting Malfoy's spell. Malfoy raised his wand and uttered, "*verbero*" as a violet colored strand of energy surged towards Moody.

Moody dove as the brunt of the spell missed its target, but a tendril of the violet energy lashed at his good leg before the grizzled ex-auror returned a perfectly aimed stunner once again nailing Malfoy. Looking reasonably impressed he healed the small welt on his leg before he once again awoke Malfoy with a quick spell. After Malfoy returned to his seat Moody said, "A very useful spell Mr. Malfoy just employed. Many of you, if not all of you, would have received a very nasty shock

at the end of that spell. While I do not condone the practice, that particular spell is used on house elves by many families to punish retreating elves. The spell itself merely is a manifestation of a witch or wizard's magic lashing out at an opponent or target."

Most of the class was writing down Moody's words before he said, "Another five points to Slytherin for Mr. Malfoy. The four of you in my dueling club, we will be having a special guest tonight following dinner. Be prepared to learn."

In the great hall, the various members of the dueling club were all buzzing with excitement over who the special guest would be for the night's meeting. A few other students were commenting on the Moody and Malfoy duel in class, but the vast majority had finally grown accustomed to the defense professor's methods.

As Harry sat quietly at the Gryffindor table eating, Moody's words from the prior lesson echoed in his head. The presence of the words only magnified a growing dread that had slowly began to creep over Harry's very existence. Each time it took even more effort from Hermione to lighten the weight of his heavy and oftentimes dangerous thoughts.

With the patience of a person fighting a long lasting battle with no end in sight, Hermione smiled for a moment and said, "Harry, I know that certain aspects of your life have made you a stoic hero. But, right now when friends surround you isn't the time."

Shrugging helplessly Harry looked straight into Hermione's eyes, "It's nothing Hermione. I just have this shadow hanging over me for some reason."

Looking for support from Ron, only to sigh as he was deep in conversation with the twins about something. Hermione replied, "Harry, I know that you tend to have a track record with these things. But spending all of your time worrying about it, well it's not going to help anything."

"You're right Hermione, and I know that. But, I just can't seem to shake the feeling." With a small smile he added, "But, I'll try harder for you."

Reaching across the table to give his hand a small squeeze, Hermione graced Harry with one of her secret little smiles that she reserved only for him, "That's all I can ask for." Putting down the toast she had nibbled on for a few minutes, too worried about Harry to eat, Hermione sighed, "Let's go get ready for dueling club Harry. Ron seems to be doing just fine with the twins right now anyways."

The two weeks or so that had progressed since the second task Remus had been especially busy making the final preparations for a move to Sirius' safe house. Dumbledore would be performing the *Fidelus* in the first week of April, in order to protect the secret of the house.

In exchange for Dumbledore's aid greasing the necessary wheels in the ministry to forget all magical records of the house, Sirius had agreed to make the house a headquarters for the resistance against the inevitable return of Voldemort. While neither the marauders or the headmaster were giving away all of their secrets, the groundwork had been laid for a friendship in the mutual respect that had been shared.

All of this was floating around in Remus' head as he sipped on some tea in his reading room, before his musings were interrupted when Sirius called out, "Moony, I've got a letter from Harry from that you might want to read."

Standing from his small lounge, Remus walked into the kitchen to see Sirius who merely handed him a letter:

Moony and Padfoot,

This letter is simply the only way I can get the words out I need to. Something big is coming, I don't know if it's Voldemort, but it wouldn't surprise me in the least. If he comes back, I have a feeling that he'll be after me again. I mean he told me as much at the end of my first and second year.

You both would have loved the meeting of the dueling club we had today. Moody and Flitwick dueled. I've never seen someone move as fast as Professor Flitwick was moving during the duel. He didn't even bother to raise a shield charm unless it was a real nasty curse. Hermione told me I was nearly as fast when she's watched me this

year. She suggested I ask Professor Flitwick for some private sessions, of course she isn't the one having to put in that extra work.

Anyways, I needed to tell you before I forget that I woke up in the middle of the night after having a nightmare about Voldemort killing the two of you. I can't do much, but I can tell you two keep your eyes open. I need the two of you old dogs, don't do anything stupid.

Love,

Harry

Sirius frowned and asked, "Doesn't this bother you Moony?"

"I've told you Padfoot; Harry isn't a child any more. Don't believe it doesn't break my heart when I realize that a 14-year-old is worried about dark wizards. But, we couldn't change Harry even if we tried. It's time to give up Harry son of Prongs, and focus on Harry the young man." Remus sighed as he ran a hand through his almost fitfully in frustration that more couldn't be done, then what they were already doing.

Sirius looking more full of life with each passing day, could only run a hand through his newly trimmed locks, but it did not escape Remus' attention that he never disagreed.

What Harry's letter hadn't detailed was his second impressive incidence of wandless magic of the school year.

"Ok now that us old codgers have shown all of you how dueling can be. I want each of you to pair off with someone of your own year, but from a different house. Extras pair up with a person closest to your skill level." Moody instructed.

Harry and Hermione shared a quick look before they were paired off with a couple of Hufflepuff's, Ernie McMillan and Susan Bones.

Hermione and Susan took their dueling positions on the mats next to the main stage where Harry and Ernie were the duel of the day amongst the students. Considering there were only twenty-four

students between the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh years, it was a very empty great hall.

Hermione and Susan bowed, and they stood stock-still waiting for the other to cast the first spell. Moody's lesson with Malfoy from earlier still resonating, until Susan shouted, "Stupefy" and watched as Hermione rolled out of the way of the red beam. Silently thankful she had changed from her skirt and into a pair of jeans, Hermione quickly returned with "expelliarmus", which Susan narrowly ducked.

Harry and Ernie's match had started in a similar fashion, both parties waiting for the other to make the first move. They continued to circle on the square stage, both keeping an eye on their respective girls.

Hermione was slowly driving Susan into evasion alone, taking away the offensive aspect of dueling, when she finally shouted, "Aquamenti" followed by "Glacius" turning the mats on Susan's side into a miniature ice rink.

No without any traction, Susan lost her balance and fell to find a stunner into her chest awaiting her arrival. Harry's attention was drawn away for a split second as Ernie cast "Reducto", which was the most dangerous spell used for the club.

A few observers let out breaths as Harry reacted a split second too slowly to dodge, so he simply raised his palm in self-defense, a bright golden shield snapped into existence as it merely absorbed the spell. Harry swayed for a moment from the magic expended in creating the shield until he stood and raised his wand, as the shield remained. Casting a silent "Stupefy", he stunned a shocked Ernie McMillan, effectively ending the match. In the uncomfortable silence following the end of the match, Hermione had a flashback of second year, with a younger Harry looking terrified at his ability to speak to a snake.

Unlike last time however, Hermione walked up to Harry on the stage and gave him a kiss on the cheek before she dragged him from the great hall to discuss what had just happened.

Finding the first empty classroom, Hermione pulled Harry's unresisting form into the room, before casting a variety of locking and privacy charms.

“Harry, what was that?”

Blinking once in surprise Harry looked at Hermione blankly before understanding dawned on his face and he said, “The shield!”

Sighing heavily Hermione took the seat next to Harry’s before biting her lip in thought. “Harry, wandless magic is almost unheard of. The headmaster is the only wizard I’ve seen or read of that can do anything beyond silencing spells or the moving of furniture.”

Harry nodded and Hermione changed tracks, “Have you ever wondered why matching a wand is important for a young witch or wizard?”

Harry frowned in thought for a second, “I imagine certain things focus magic better.”

Hermione nodded approvingly and continued her small lecture, to take Harry’s mind off of what had happened moments earlier, “You see Harry, magical cores in wands are necessary to also enhance the magic of the user. The wands are made of magical wood to handle the magical current flowing through them. The more powerful the wand core as a focus, the more powerful the witch or wizard. The phoenix feather is perhaps the most powerful magical core that exists. When Ollivander told you that he could expect great things from you, it had less to do with your scar and more to do with your wand core.”

Harry had reached his attention threshold and asked, “Ok, but what does this have to do with wandless magic?”

Hermione sighed, “I’m getting there Harry. You see, most witches and wizards need the wands to cast any spells at all. In terms of magical strength the best in the practical in classes, truly are the best witches and wizards. I only get better grades than you do, because I work so hard at it Harry. While I am well above average in magical potency, you are light years ahead of everyone, including the headmaster.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair and asked, “So am I like some super powered wizard?”

Hermione nodded but said, "In terms of magical power yes you are 'super powered'. But there is more to magic than mere power. Mental discipline and a strong background in spell theory are other assets. But, back to the wandless magic. You see when a witch or wizard is sufficiently powerful their body can act as the conduit to use magic. In all recorded cases intent is the most important factor when using wandless magic. You needed a shield and your magic provided you with one. A very impressive shield, but a shield nonetheless."

Harry expelled a deep breath and asked, "So do you think my strong magic is why I survived the killing curse?"

Hermione frowned and shook her head, "I think there is something more to it. But, undoubtedly your strong magic enhanced the process. That may be the reason that you are a parseltongue, or it may not. At any rate, you are special Harry both magically and as a person."

Harry smiled wanly, "That means a lot to me."

Hermione leaned in and gave him a chaste kiss on the lips before she stood and said, "With that taken care of, I think you owe me a trip to the kitchens for a late night snack."

Harry smiled, "Pumpkin pie and treacle tart sound ok?" Hermione merely smiled as she leaned into Harry's shoulder in response.

Bright and early Saturday morning Harry was broken from a peaceful dream about Quidditch and Hermione cheering for him as Ron punched him in the shoulder. Harry groaned as he fished around for his glasses, "Bloody hell Ron, it's only eight."

Ron tapped his foot impatiently before he smirked, "You can take a nap later with Herms, I'm sure she won't mind being your pillow."

Letting out a breath of defeat Harry rolled out of his bed, consciously waving his hand in an attempt to make his bed. With only a small amount of effort the bed slowly was made. Ron had already bounded over to grab his broom, and missed the little display.

Harry cast a quick *scourgify* on himself as he put on a sweatshirt and jacket to combat the early morning chill. Grabbing his gloves he

removed his broom from his trunk and a quick sizing charm later it was back to full size. Upon seeing Ron's excitement, any aggravation with his best friend melted away, "Let's just fly for awhile. We can worry about a little training when it warms up about outside."

After flying for nearly two hours Ron's jubilant exclamation of "Bloody hell, that was awesome." Ron's enthusiastic stamp of approval on his new broom couldn't help but bring a huge grin to Harry's face.

The remainder of March passed by in a flurry of classes and training for the third task. Harry continued to progress to his first transformation for his animagus form.

In London however, a meeting of great importance to Harry, indirectly at the least was taking place.

"Hello Albus."

"Ah greetings my friends. Lovely spring weather we're having, isn't it?" Dumbledore's eyes were full of mirth that only an old man discussing the weather would have.

Remus snorted, "Now Albus, perhaps we can save the small talk until we finish the spell. Snuffles would like to participate in the conversation as well. As it is all he can do now is bark or hump your leg." The black grim off to the side growled as Remus and Dumbledore chuckled.

Pulling four blood red stones from a pocket in his robes Dumbledore said, "You need to place these four stones at the four corners of the property that you want hidden."

Remus nodded as Snuffles led him around the yard signaling where to place the stones, with the final stone being placed the stones all began to glow. Walking back to Dumbledore the old wizard nodded, "Very well. Now I am to assume you wish for me to act as your secret keeper as we discussed." Remus and Snuffles nodded in response.

Dumbledore took a deep breath and uttered, "*Fidelus Abscondito*" a bright white beam shot from his wand and linked to the nearest stone, which focused the beam as it flowed to the next stone and so forth.

When the tendrils of white magic began to spread upwards in sheets of magic, a final pop rang through the silence as the magic completed its task and vanished.

Dumbledore had flicked his wand, as it shifted into an elegant white staff, which he leaned upon heavily in weariness. Pulling a piece of parchment from his robes Dumbledore wrote a quick note on a piece of parchment, "Remus please show this to Sirius, so that we may move inside."

Remus read the note as 12 Grimmauld place shimmered back into sight, before he passed the note to Sirius now in human form and the same happened for him. Taking Dumbledore's arm they helped the older wizard into the front door of the ancient manor.

Finding three chairs to sit in Dumbledore sighed heavily, "It is a very draining spell. Fortunately, it is not one I am asked to perform often."

Sirius frowned, "What were those stones?"

"They were bloodstones of the Dumbledore clan, very useful amplifiers of magic such as the *Fidelus* charm. With this in place, I believe Harry's safety can be guaranteed here after a week to renew the protections at Privet Drive."

Remus nodded thoughtfully, "So, if Harry's concerns ring true then the prophecy that James and Lily went into hiding over may be fulfilled soon."

Dumbledore stoked his beard, "It has recently come to my attention that the ultimate destruction of Tom Riddle will not come easily. In fact, I may have to employ your services Remus as a researcher. Of course, you can help as well Sirius, but many of the resources necessary for the research will have to be done outside of the manor. You will be vital in developing a reasonable training regime for Harry and any of his friends that wish to participate."

Remus and Sirius shared a look before Remus said, "In other words Hermione and Ron Weasley."

Dumbledore nodded with a strange smile on his face, "The Weasley's ancestral home is vulnerable. You may be asked to harbor Arthur, Molly, and the children until Alastor can complete the necessary improvements."

Sirius frowned and said, "That's perfectly all right, but you need to have a talk with Molly, so that she understands that this is not her house. In fact, if that old family elf is still alive, he is in hiding somewhere. Harry and Hermione both have paid elves that can accommodate for extra people this summer. I believe it would be best to have a talk with the Grangers soon Albus."

Dumbledore steeped his fingers in thought for a moment, "You are of course correct Sirius. I will arrange a meeting for later this month. With any luck Tom's return won't happen for a few more years, so that Harry can be fully prepared and the existing protections Tom has in place will be discovered and destroyed."

Remus frowned, "With any luck, Harry never would have been prophesized to kill that bastard in the first place." The other two merely nodded their agreement; fate and destiny were indeed a pair of fickle mistresses.

A/N: It took a bit longer to update this time, but such is life. Now that I am done with classes for a few weeks I have updates for Destiny Reformed and Maturation that need to be completed before the next chapter for this story will be written.

Next chapter, Harry finally finds his animagus form...I am between a couple of forms but anyone who has a suggestion I will listen to. We also have the days leading up to the third task, and a strange confrontation with someone.

Thanks to all of you that have reviewed thus far, and thanks for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 15

“Harry you just have to relax. You’re making very good progress. Why don’t you try to transfigure your hands once more, and this time think about something relaxing when you do it.” Hermione softly suggested to a very aggravated looking Harry Potter.

Harry grunted as he slowly flicked his wand and began to concentrate more on the flicker of the firelight on the shadows cast against the wall. Harry slowed his breathing as he transfigured his left thumb before he glanced up at the walls, which had taken on a strange aura. As he prepared to transfigure his right hand he switched hands to complete the task when it happened.

Hermione would occasionally glance over as Harry grumbled about the injustice of his life in relation to the animagus transformation. She heard a strange purring sound and quickly glanced over thinking Harry had finally mastered his form when she caught a faint glance of a black blur fall into a shadow in the corner.

Hermione felt the bottom drop out of her stomach as realized that Harry’s animagus form introduced new and complex complications to the animagus protocol. As she waited for several heart wrenching seconds, the same feeling of dread she had gotten when Harry’s tumbling form had appeared in the sky during the Hufflepuff Quidditch match.

Therefore it had come as quite a surprise when a large panther with striking green eyes appeared from the exact same shadow and bounced off of the chair before skidding into her with a resounding thump. Hermione groaned as the large cat scampered off and managed to like very contrite as she slowly composed herself all the while taking in the features of the creature before her.

It appeared to be a normal panther in almost every sense of the word. Specifically he was a melanistic jaguar based upon the sturdy build of his body and if she really looked closely she could still see the faint outline of the same spots in her own form’s fur. Additionally, something was sending a strange buzz through her body; perhaps it was a pheromone of some sort. Cataloging all of those interesting but

useless facts she pointed her wand at Harry and uttered the animagus-revealing spell.

With a sigh of relief she watched Harry smoothly transform back to his typical form with a look akin to wonder on his face. With a rush of air Hermione took a deep breath before she asked, "What exactly happened there Harry?"

Shaking his head in wonder Harry quietly replied, "Well, I was pulled into the shadow of the room and I came out of a shadow in the great hall. Fortunately no one else was around, but it was strange. It felt like I was compacted into the size of a marble for a moment before I squeezed out of the other shadow. Suddenly I got this strange pain in my chest and I just knew where I needed to go, and then I came back out in here."

Hermione's head was swimming as Harry had somehow managed to disprove several of her long-standing thoughts on magical theory. Banishing those thoughts to the back of her mind, her curiosity and need to solve a puzzle rushed forward as she pondered aloud, "A magical panther of some sort that can travel in shadows. Hagrid hasn't ever discussed something like that in class before and if we asked him it would seem rather strange and suspicious. Of course, he would inform the headmaster and I imagine he would force us to at least share our forms with him."

Harry smiled and gently said, "Hermione you're babbling."

Hermione arched an eyebrow in incredulity, "I wouldn't need to babble if you didn't dispel all of my beliefs about the nature of magic without any effort all in one night."

Harry shrugged and replied, "I wouldn't say it came without effort, after all I've been working five hours every Saturday night for the last month and a half trying to master my first transformation."

Hermione rolled her eyes and said, "Try to transform once more tonight, and then tomorrow we'll try to research what you are in the library."

Harry nodded and he focused on the feel of transforming as he slowly but gracefully shifted into his panther form. However, unlike the previous transformation he didn't feel compelled or drawn to any shadows. With a mowl of relief he transformed back slightly faster and felt a rush of happiness shoot through him. He had done it; he had mastered his animagus transformation.

Hermione managed a smile and warm hug before she gave him a peck on the cheek and said, "I'm very proud of you Harry." Her demeanor shifted to homework mode as she added, "But, don't think this gets you out of a trip to the library tomorrow with me."

Harry's grin wasn't weakened at all by her words as he simply replied, "That's fine, but that also means we get to go flying next weekend as payment."

Hermione opened her mouth once before it closed and she merely nodded with a strange smile on her face as she whispered, "Goodnight Harry" before she walked up the stairs to the girls dorm.

Harry shook his head after a moment of replaying and savoring the feel of Hermione's hot breath on his ear, he smiled impishly to himself before ascending the stairs towards his bed and a well deserved night of sleep.

Bright and early Sunday morning Hermione was preparing to rouse Harry from his sleep, thankful that the others boys in the dorm were sleeping with their hangings drawn around their beds. Pulling the hangings on Harry's bed she was gifted to the strange sight of Harry without his glasses on. While she had seen him without his glasses before, the worry of waiting for him to awake must have made noticing such a simple difference impossible.

With a shy smile she reached over and gently brushed his cheek with the back of her hand. Harry moved his cheek into her touch and she blushed furiously. Touching Harry's cheek like she was seemed infinitely more intimate than all of their kisses before had combined. After waiting a moment for her blush to fade she gently shook his shoulder and smiled as he blinked owlishly for a moment before reaching over to his nightstand and pulling his glasses on.

Stifling a huge yawn and covering his morning breath with his hand he sleepily murmured, "Morning."

Hermione quickly replied in an all business tone, "Good morning to you Harry. I thought it would be best if we checked the library early to avoid the crowds and any potential questions."

Harry groaned as he pulled the pillow into his face before he pulled it away and said, "If you wanted to avoid the crowds we could have just used the map and my invisibility cloak."

Hermione blushed as she smoothed out an imagined wrinkle on her blouse before she replied, "Harry, I think that fitting two people of our age under an invisibility cloak could be construed in only one way if we were caught." Her blush faded slightly she continued, "Also, unlike some people that shall remain unnamed I don't break rules simply because they exist."

With a sigh and a nod Harry rolled out of his bed and almost absently waved his wand as it remade itself with a small bit of wandless magic. Hermione arched her eyebrow but didn't comment on the act as she said, "Meet me down in the common room in about twenty minutes. That should give you enough time to shower and brush your teeth."

True to form, Harry had finished his morning hygiene routine in roughly fifteen minutes as he walked down the stairs and found Hermione all alone in the common room. With a resigned sigh, "You woke me up at seven in the morning on a Sunday after I went to bed four hours earlier. Have you no shame?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, "You can take a nap later Harry. We need to figure this out before you transform and fall through a shadow and end up in China or something."

With a small shrug that indicated Harry could deal with that more readily than the cardinal sin of a lost lie in, Hermione tugged on Harry's hand in aggravation as they exited the portrait hole and began to walk towards the library.

By the time they reached the library, the little tiff had been ended amiably as Harry eventually did agree that his unpredictable power in

animagus form was more valuable than a lie in. Of course it didn't hurt that Hermione compromised on the homework schedule of the afternoon and built in some Harry naptime.

Dropping a handful of parchment and quills on her usual table, she instructed, "Follow me, we'll likely have to grab several books before we find your form."

As they rounded a corner that separated the charms section from the magical creatures section of books they were startled to see someone other than Madam Pince there. It was the blonde girl from Ravenclaw that had joined S.P.E.R.E, which was proceeding nicely, as a booth had been approved by the ministry under the guise that Harry Potter personally requested it.

Hermione was too startled with the fact that someone else was in the library let alone the exact same section to utter a word. However, Harry managed a slight smile and said, "Hello Luna, I see you're here to beat the crowds like we are." Of course Harry managed to stuff as much sarcasm into the short sentence as possible, all of it directed at Hermione who by appearances didn't appreciate it.

Luna seemed unperturbed by Harry's words as she replied, "I was looking for the book on Nicaraguan Nerfherders, but it appears to be checked out."

Hermione opened her mouth to retort but closed it with a frustrated grimace as Harry continued, "I see, well we're here researching magical creatures for Care and Hermione here wanted to *beat the rush* I believe was how she put it."

Hermione huffed and tartly said, "I do believe you are planning on taking a nap this afternoon and this is as much for you if not more than for me. Now we need to get the books on magical species of Asia, Africa, North America, and South America. You get the first two and I'll get the last."

Harry nodded as he murmured some kind of good bye to Luna before he began to work his way through the magical creature stacks near the beginning as Hermione shifted over to a few stacks down.

After several minutes of looking Harry emerged with his two volumes just as Hermione managed the same, mirroring his relieved expression. After settling down in their chairs Hermione quietly said, "Look for panthers of any kind. Non-magical Jaguars are found in South and Central America, but I have no idea as to the magical ones."

Harry nodded stifling a yawn as he opened his book from Africa and began to work through the pages, using a word searching charm Hermione had taught him earlier in the year. A charm that she thanked for aiding her tremendously, after discovering it following all of her research for Buckbeak's case and later his appeal.

It had been a half an hour when he came across the passage for nerfherders and had to bite his hand to keep from laughing out loud from the murderous look Hermione had shot him when he gently pointed it out. Harry was halfway through his volume on Africa, just having finished skimming a section on Nundus when Hermione squeaked quietly before shoving the book in his face.

Harry gave her a startled look before he glanced down at the South American Index of Magical Creatures at the page Hermione had marked for him.

Twilight Panther

A very rare and unusual magical creature, which has been sighted on every continent aside from Antarctica. The twilight panther is the rare combination of a magical species that can freely mate with the non-magical counterpart a species called jaguars. By all appearances, the magical gene in the creature is highly recessive and has been found to occur at random times of population upheaval for jaguars.

A panther is merely the melanistic form of various species of large cats such as a cougar, jaguar, and leopard species. Twilight panthers have only been traced to jaguar families, although the possibility remains for other species of the creature to exist.

The exact nature of the creature's power is unknown, but stories of travel through shadows and amazing feats of stealth in hunting tend to belie a probability of truth. The name is derived from the time of

greatest recorded activity by the creature as countless unexplained kills have occurred ay this time.

The Twilight Panther is one of the few creatures known to hunt Nundu successfully, and have even been known to hunt Lethifolds for sport. By a look the Twilight panther is a common non-magical animal, but in this case looks can be very deceiving. For more information on panthers, read the companion book non-magical animals of South America.

Harry ran a hand through his hair in thought before he said, "I reckon this could be a very valuable tool."

Hermione snorted quietly, a very odd sound, before she replied, "Harry, with this power you can bypass any magical ward. Think of the evil a dark wizard could do with this."

Harry nodded thoughtfully before he said, "I'll have to find a safe way to test the limitations of shadow travel or whatever you want to call it. Maybe I could even travel with another being if they were in contact with me. I'm afraid the book wasn't all that much help."

Hermione merely shrugged, "I learned a long time ago that not all answers can be found in books. I think it was some scrawny black haired green-eyed boy that first showed me that." Hermione's gave Harry a teasing smile and asked, "I wonder what happened to him?"

Harry chuckled quietly as he finished copying down the passage on to a piece of parchment. After a moment he replied, "Probably the same place that bushy haired cute little know it all went to."

Hermione feigned anger as she playfully swatted his arm and said with a glance to her watch, "Ok, if we take care of our books now and take our notes and quills back to the common room we should have time to go and grab lunch. Then you can take your nap." She was merely answered with a small grin that did strange things to her heart rate.

Harry and Hermione certainly weren't the only couple dancing on the edges of a relationship, as Neville and Ginny were taking a very different route than the other two were. The days following the Yule

Ball they had appeared to be a couple in all but name as they walked nearly everywhere together. But, for some strange reason known only to Neville he had begun to pull away and exhibit the same stuttering mannerisms that had become synonymous with him.

At first, Ginny had taken Neville's actions as a direct rejection of her as a potential girlfriend, until she saw it was making him even more miserable than it was her. Finally she understood his actions, he was separating himself to spare her the disappointment of what he would be as a boyfriend. By the middle of March they had regained what had been lost in the days following the Yule Ball. Ginny now understood that she would have to be the one to show Neville why he would be such a great wizard.

On the other hand Neville was still quite leery of dating Gin for the simple reason that it was something he was bound to mess up. He hadn't gained the title as the joke of Gryffindor house for nothing after all and it had been something new almost every year. First year it had been his petrification at the wand of Hermione simply because he had wanted to help his house. Second year it had been the pixie incident, although that had been more Lockhart's fault than his own. Third year had been his failed attempt at asking Susan Bones out and even his run in with the magical monsters book for Hagrid's class. This year had been better, but he was sure he still had time to mess something up, and this year it would be his chances with Ginny.

Ginny was thinking about all of this much like Neville when he entered the common room on Sunday, as Harry napped in the corner occasionally muttering something in his sleep about shadows. Hermione was reading a book in the other plush chair in the room directly next to him and would roll her eyes every time he muttered something in his sleep. It was commonly known that Ron was the champion for snoring in Gryffindor tower, and also that Harry didn't go a night of sleep without talking about something. Of course often the topics were of a very unpleasant nature, but like today boring things would be muttered on occasion.

Neville walked over to the couch where Ginny sat and settled into the space next to her before he said, "What's up Gin?"

Ginny managed a small smile, "I'm just finishing up my Arithmancy project. Where have you been this afternoon Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville seemed to relax completely at her teasing tone and replied, "I was helping Professor Sprout with some of her Dillisprouts. She's been leaning on me more and more lately. I think the tournament is finally getting to her. She's been blaming herself for not thinking of gillyweed as a solution for Cedric in the second task."

Ginny nodded with a smile and said, "Well that just shows how much she thinks of you Neville. I'm sure she wouldn't depend on you if she thought you were a liability."

Neville sighed heavily, "I'm not going to argue that Gin. But, Herbology is the only class I'm not a bumbling idiot in." Ginny merely nodded, after all Rome wasn't built in a day and Neville's confidence couldn't be either.

As the excitement from Harry's successful foray into the few animagus of the world began to ebb, Hermione was suddenly reminded of another animagus problem, Rita Skeeter. While Hermione definitely thought she had a permanent solution to the problem, it all hinged on Rita Skeeter if it would ultimately succeed in its purpose. The purpose being to stop her from using her animagus abilities for personal gain in the future while not being overly harsh in the process.

Hours of legal research had been fruitful, as Hermione had uncovered a now obscure case from the period during the last goblin rebellion. One wizard's loyalties had been for sale during the time and he had used his animagus abilities to spy upon the ministry of magic forces of the time. The wizard was known as Dervish the Devious and for his crimes he paid the mandatory fine for being an unregistered animagus and for using his animagus form for extreme personal gain he served the maximum of ten years in Azkaban prison.

Hermione had designs of informing Rita of legal precedence that using her animagus form could eventually land her in Azkaban. A simple tracking spell had been tuned to Skeeter's animagus signature and it would alert Hermione to the usage of Skeeter's animagus form. If a defamatory article could be tied in with the usage then Hermione

would simply send a letter to Headmaster Dumbledore detailing Skeeter's misdeeds and she would be prosecuted for her unscrupulous ways.

With a head full of confidence Hermione waited for her dorm to empty before she placed several locking and silencing charms on the door and room before she unscrewed the jar and patiently waited for the beetle to fly out and transform back into one Rita Skeeter. After nearly a month and a half of living in a jar eating grass and other appropriate feedstuff she looked a little thinner but nothing noticeable. The biggest difference could be seen in the woman's eyes. For the first time there was a hint of fear at the retribution she would receive for her wicked ways.

Hermione smiled as she Skeeter her wand before she said, "Hello Rita, have you enjoyed your vacation?"

Skeeter sat down on Hermione's bed, her legs having atrophied some from lack of use for the last month or so. After a moment she spoke in a scratchy sounding voice, "Haven't you done enough already you vindictive little girl?"

Hermione smiled sweetly, "I quite agree Rita. In fact, I don't plan on making a big deal out of your illegal animagus transformations if you don't transform to gather private information about others ever again. I have no issue if you transform, only if you transform to spy upon others. I've read the laws, there is no freedom of press in the wizarding world, but there is a penalty for using one's animagus abilities unregistered or registered for extreme personal gain. Have you ever heard the story of Dervish the devious?"

Rita scowled and bitterly replied, "I can't say that I have, but I'm sure you'll find it in your heart to tell me despite the fact."

Hermione smirked, "Well since you asked so kindly Rita, I'd be happy to tell you. You see, Dervish was like you, he spied on others using his animagus ability of a tarantula. But, he spied on the wrong people and was trapped much like you were. But unlike the people that trapped him, I am giving you a simple choice in your own destiny. If you can write stories with real sources and truth in them, then you won't have to end up like Dervish."

Rita shook her head and said with less sarcasm, "So what happened to Dervish?"

Hermione shrugged and said, "He went to Azkaban for ten years and killed himself in his third month."

Rita couldn't suppress a shudder at the thought of what Azkaban could do to her before she replied, "Ok, I'll do it your way."

Hermione gave the older witch an appraising smile before she said, "Brilliant Ms. Skeeter." After a moment's thought she added, "Who knows, if you prove yourself to be trustworthy then maybe we might reward you with an actual interview in the future some time."

Rita's eyes lit up with greed for a moment before she said, "I'll see what I can do. Now, I presume you have no problem with me transforming to leave the castle undetected?" Hermione shook her head and waved her hand to show Skeeter she had nothing else to say. A moment later Skeeter was gone and Hermione dropped the privacy charms just in time as Parvati needed to pick up a shirt she had borrowed from a fifth year girl.

Meanwhile down in the common room, Harry and Ron were both reading the newest Quidditch Premiere Monthly magazine as they discussed the state of things.

"Listen mate, I erm got a letter from Percy." Ron nervously said as they turned a page.

Harry arched an eyebrow, "And?"

Ron's ears tinged with red, "He told me that I should stop being your friend because our family needs to disassociate ourselves from you."

Harry furrowed his brow, "Why would he say that?"

Ron swallowed heavily, "Well he said that the ministry and the followers of you-know-who are going to feel threatened if you and Dumbledore become much cozier."

Harry shut the magazine frowning, "I don't see the connection mate."

Ron sighed as he leaned back on the couch, "Well obviously you-know-who's followers want revenge for you defeating their master. The ministry on the other hand always tries to control private witches or wizards that could prove to be a challenge to ministry power. If you think about it, taking out a threat before they become an adult does make sense."

Harry frowned, "But I thought Minister Fudge liked me?"

Ron sighed, "Politicians always use people to their own benefit. I reckon that as long as you don't give Fudge and the rest of the ministry a chance to single you out then you'll be alright. It doesn't matter anyways, if Percy the ponce thinks I'll just give up my best friend to keep the family name clean then he doesn't know me well at all."

Harry smiled, "No I reckon he doesn't. But, then again Ron Weasley is full of all kinds of surprises, isn't he?"

Ron's face went red from Harry's gentle teasing before he snatched the magazine from Harry's hand and said, "Oh sod off Potter." Harry chuckled and the serious part of the conversation was over.

The days of April quickly passed as the highlights of the month included a grand prank on Fred and George on their birthday, which was incidentally April Fool's Day. Working together they had managed a hex that would have both of them speaking whenever someone spoke to them, and more importantly their voices had been charmed to speak in Italian Opera voices for the entirety of their birthday. It had been a fair effort for their first prank, and they both knew they would only get better.

Classes had been going quite well and Harry's sessions with Dumbledore were beginning to wind down as Harry entered the headmaster's office in the first week of May.

Dumbledore was leaning back in his chair, perhaps in the throes of a nap as Harry entered the older wizard's office. Fawkes trilled much like an alarm clock and Dumbledore shifted quickly and blinked as his eyes fluttered open.

Harry chuckled softly as the old wizard took his bearings before he spotted Harry and said, "Ah Harry, right on time."

Harry took his normal seat as Dumbledore pulled a few pieces of parchment together, "Today Harry we are simply going to talk about life and how the school year is going."

Harry relaxed in his chair, "Yes sir."

Dumbledore smiled serenely, "How are classes going this year?"

Harry ran his left hand through his hair, "Classes are going pretty well. I think I have all Exceeds Expectations and Outstandings aside from the Poor I have right now in Divination."

Dumbledore nodded approvingly, "Yes, Professor Snape has told me that you have been a very competent potions maker this year."

Harry snorted, "I haven't improved any this year sir, he just hasn't harassed me or docked points for any reason he can think of. It's a lot easier to brew potions when the professor isn't out to get you."

Dumbledore sighed but nodded, conceding the point as he continued, "I hear that you have reconciled with young Mr. Weasley."

Harry nodded, "Yeah, I mean he is one of my best friends after all. Sometimes he just doesn't think before saying or doing something."

Dumbledore chuckled, "Ah yes the rashness of youth."

Harry shrugged and said, "Aside from the whole tri-wizard thing this year, well it has been the best year I've had at Hogwarts sir."

Dumbledore smiled, "I am most happy to hear that Harry. I dare say that with your improved marks and all of the extra work you have put forth this year, you will most definitely be the fifth year prefect for Gryffindor house next year. However, I think it would be best if we kept that to ourselves."

Harry shrugged, he had listened as Hermione had prattled on about being a prefect all year, so he imagined she would most likely be the

other prefect from their year. Harry wasn't too interested in earning more recognition but it would make Hermione happy so it would make him happy.

Dumbledore apparently understood Harry's indifference as the older wizard continued, "I have personally helped Remus and Sirius set up their home in London, and I believe you will be able to spend the balance of the summer there. However, you still must spend the first week of summer vacation with your relatives."

Harry managed a small smile at this bit of news, he had certainly hoped for as much, but he had gotten his hopes up in the past in relation to limiting his time with the Dursleys and hadn't wanted to repeat that feeling again this year. After a moment of silence Harry fitfully asked, "Sir, do you think Voldemort will try anything before the year is over?"

Dumbledore peered down his crescent shaped glasses before he gravely stated, "That, I'm afraid, will happen regardless of what we wish. Tom's return is but a mere formality, the only thing left to chance is the time and place. If not for your excellent start on Occlumency you would have felt this ascent much more vividly than you have."

Harry sighed, it had been a long day and Dumbledore really hadn't told him anything he didn't already know, aside from the prefect thing, so he quietly said, "Sir, I have a History of Magic exam tomorrow morning and I really would like to get some sleep tonight. Was there anything else we needed to talk about?"

Dumbledore smiled serenely, "No my boy I believe that was everything I wanted to hear about. In fact, I believe we can cease these training sessions for the remainder of the term. But, I must impress upon you the importance of practicing all of the new and advanced magic you have been taught this year. As you can attest to, one never knows when adventure will select them for a dance."

Harry rolled his eyes as he exited Dumbledore's office, the headmaster sure was a strange old man sometimes.

A/N: Here we are another chapter, I hope the wait hasn't been too long for most of you. So tell me, what did everyone think of Harry's animagus form. Aside from shadow travel he is a regular panther...just like in Vox Corporis. Well timing has never been my strongest suit.

Ok now after a one-chapter absence we have the question of the chapter. The seventh book's title has recently been released *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

What does anyone think the title might be in reference to? I will try to answer as many attempts as I can with my own suspicions.

Next chapter we have the run up to the tri-wizard tournament, a return for our favorite antagonist (Malfoy), and we get the forewarning for the tri-wizard tournament.

Thanks to all of you that have reviewed, and thanks for reading.

Chapter 16

Things had begun to look up for Remus Lupin, ever since he had received a letter from Headmaster Albus Dumbledore requesting he take the Defense Against the Dark Arts professorial position. While several less than savory things happened over the course of the year, the term ended with a friend regained and the truth about James and Lily's deaths discovered.

Perhaps equally important to Remus was that he had met and gotten to know young Harry. Harry reminded Remus so much of his father in his intense moments, but unlike James he had a kind heart much more like Lily. This year had continued that fledgling peer mentor relationship, as Remus settled into what could be considered the role of a favorite uncle with Harry. Sirius on the other hand was an odd combination of friend, confidant, and father figure, but so far it seemed to be working quite nicely.

Remus looked around the small dining room, which was originally for the help, long before wizards owned house elves. Sirius had made a few requests to make his familial house more habitable, and one included using the family dining room as a meeting and planning room. It was early, much earlier than Sirius ever rolled out of bed, and Remus had an appointment with Will Hardison to make the final arrangements for Harry and Hermione's Occlumency and Legilimency training.

Finishing of his breakfast tea, Remus deposited the dishes in the kitchen sink before he walked over to the FLOO place and with a pinch from the large FLOO powder pot he said, "Ministry of Magic."

A matter of fifteen minutes later and Remus found himself in Will's office, but unlike the previous time Remus had made an official appointment with some lame academic reason for the meeting.

Will was poring over a file as Remus had entered, which he immediately set aside, "Ah Remy, how are you doing old chap?"

Remus smiled as he settled into his seat, "I'm good Will. How is work?"

Will leaned back in his chair, "Actually it's been very quiet for the oblivators since the world cup. Good thing too, the department worked so much overtime that weekend that Fudge has ordered skeleton crews at night to recoup some of the budget shortfall that occurred as a result. Thank Merlin there hasn't been a stray dragon down from Sweden or anything."

Remus grinned, "Have you ever wondered what the muggles would think do if they knew that all of those alien abductions were obliations following time at St. Mungo's from a magical mishap?"

Will merely shrugged, "I think an alien abduction is easier to swallow than being told that there is a hidden world amongst them where magic is real."

Remus nodded thoughtfully, "Yes well be that as it may, I'm afraid this isn't entirely a trip of leisure."

Will didn't appear to concerned with this as he asked, "That's quite alright Remy, in fact I have a small booklet you can give to my two pupils at the soonest possible time to make the most of our time this summer." Furrowing his brow he continued, "How is Mr. Potter dealing with the stresses of the tournament? The news has definitely dried up since Rita Skeeter stopped on her warpath."

Remus smiled ruefully, "Well if I had my druthers Harry wouldn't have to worry about preparing for the tournament. I have a sneaking suspicion the years of reasonably carefree adolescence are coming to an end. But for a fourteen-year-old boy I'd say he is handling the stresses of the tournament remarkably."

Will nodded, "So then when do we want to start?"

Remus pulled out small day planner and replied, "Well, Harry will be at some other relatives the first week of summer. I imagine the second week in July would work quite nicely as a starting date."

Will pulled out a small planner and with a mark he nodded, "Yes, that should work just fine. I quite look forward to the challenge Remus."

Remus smiled as he glanced at his watch, "Well, since we have another hour to talk. What do you say to a couple of glasses of Scotch while I tell you a story about Harry when he was a baby?"

It was nearly noon and a couple of rescheduled appointments later when Remus finally walked out of Will's office only by the grace of a very strong sobering charm. Feeling rather happy with the events of the day Remus remembered that it had been very seasonable the last few weeks in London and decided to walk for a bit before returning to Grimmauld.

As he neared the lifts someone ran into him from the side, apparently not looking where they were going. Remus turned to say something when the familiar face of Tonks was beaming back at him, "Wotcher there Mr. Lupin."

Remus smiled, his anger forgotten, "That's quite alright Ms. Tonks, and it's Remus."

Tonks blushed as her hair shifted from Pink to blonde in connection to her embarrassment before she nodded, "I was just getting ready to grab some lunch. Fancy joining me?"

Remus opened his mouth in shock a few times as no sound escaped. Remus was well versed in the art of flirting, but his condition had always kept him from taking a chance with the few opportunities at relationships he might have had. But, this time a combination of factors as mundane as getting the last scone at Grimmauld, and as important as the meeting with Will, gave him the last little boost in confidence he had always needed in taking such a chance.

Give her a charming smile he replied, "I'd like that very much Ms. Tonks."

Tonks grinned as her hair returned to its prior state and she said, "Call me Tonks please. All of this Ms. stuff is making me uncomfortable."

By the time they had found a small magical restaurant down the road, big with the muggleborn ministry workers, and settled into a small table outside.

Tonks arched her eyebrow at Remus, who had suddenly forgotten how to speak, "You know Remus, usually when I go out on a lunch date it involves at least some talking from both of us."

Remus sighed as he nervously replied, "Right, sorry about that erm Tonks. You see I've never been a big date kind of man in the past." After a moment of awkward silence, "So, what's working as an auror like?"

Tonks sighed, "Well, as you already might have guessed being a metamorph was too big of a tool for the auror department to pass up."

Remus nodded, "What about the rest of your academy class?"

Tonks took a sip of her water, "The present minister seems to be of the belief that the auror squad numbers should be kept low."

Remus was about to reply when a waiter handed them a pair of menus and took their drink orders of a diet coke for Tonks and lemonade for Remus. Tonks took the opportunity to ask something she had been wondering about for awhile, "Remus, you mentioned when we first met that you knew my mother. How exactly did you know her?"

Remus sighed, unsure of what he could safely tell her, before he settled on, "You've heard of Sirius Black I presume?"

Tonks blinked but nodded as Remus continued, "Sirius was one of my best friends going through Hogwarts. What you might not now however, is that you are Sirius' second cousin."

With a look of shock on her face, Remus continued with a rueful grin, "Anyways, we visited with your mother quite frequently during the summers. Especially considering that she was the only one of Sirius' relatives that could be considered anything other than Pro-Voldemort."

Tonks nodded sadly, her mother had informed her of her two aunts, "Ok, so you knew my mum back when you went to Hogwarts. So, since you were such good friends with the traitor maybe you could explain why he did it."

Remus sighed, "I've come across some very persuasive evidence that suggests Sirius was wrongfully placed in Azkaban. In fact, even Albus Dumbledore supports my belief. But, without proof we can't make such claims public knowledge."

Tonks looked rather shocked by Remus' forthcoming nature and she jokingly asked, "Is there anything else you'd like to share?"

Remus caught the teasing nature of her voice and decided to get the air completely clear, "Only one thing actually."

Tonks grinned coyly, "Oh?"

Remus frowned, "I've been infected with lycanthropy since I was seven years old."

This caught Tonks completely by surprise as she muttered a startled, "No!"

Remus sighed and cast his eyes down at the table as he muttered, "This is usually when you go running for the hills. At least that has been my experience in the past anyways."

Tonks was able to gather her emotions to say, "No, you just startled me is all. Give me a second to take this all in."

As Remus selected a roast beef sandwich for his lunch as he sipped from his lemonade nervously waiting for Tonks to comment on his statements. After Tonks ordered a chicken salad sandwich she said, "Ok let me handle each of those statements in turn."

Taking a sip of her soft drink she began, "There aren't many in the auror department that haven't heard of the lack of a trial Mr. Black endured before being thrown into Azkaban. In fact, I believe that he was the only suspected deatheater not given a proper trial. So, I can definitely believe that he is innocent. But, that is a story and explanation for a different time."

Remus nodded and took another sip of his lemonade waiting for Tonks to continue, "Now about the werewolf thing. I personally don't have any of the discriminating beliefs that most do about werewolves."

So, if you are responsible and cage yourself during the full moons then there is little else you can do aside from taking the Wolfsbane potion.”

Remus smiled slightly, “Well I like to think of it as an illness I just so happen to get most months that makes me very unpleasant to be around.”

Tonks laughed softly, “You and me both honey.”

Remus blushed, “Yes well, at any rate I do everything I can to not let it limit my life. The one exception to that being obviously my love life.”

Tonks was extremely flattered that Remus was being so open with her, and she softly said, “Well, we’ll just have to see what we can do about that now won’t we?”

Remus could only grin in response as Tonks reached her hand across the table and gave his hand a gentle squeeze before they lapsed into conversation about their times at Hogwarts.

At Hogwarts Harry awoke early Friday morning, intent on cramming one last time before the History of Magic exam. His discussion with Dumbledore the previous night was ended because he had wanted to study, but almost as importantly he was helping Hermione make her mum a necklace with muggle craft supplies. In fact as they sent Hedwig in flight with the finished present Hermione had softly said, “I told mum it was from both of us.”

It was strange how such a simple statement affected Harry as strongly as it did, perhaps it was some inner longing for the mother he would never really know, but he did know that it was a discomfort he hadn’t felt in a very long time.

As Harry entered the great hall he spotted Hermione sitting in her usual spot, face buried in her potions text. It was a routine that before every Potions class Hermione would review the potion they were scheduled to make for the class, to have that added level of security.

After sitting in his usual seat next to Hermione he poured himself a hearty glass of pumpkin juice before taking one big swig and

releasing a quenched sigh. Turning to Hermione he asked, "What's the potion for today?"

Hermione lowered the book enough to make eye contact, "A strengthening draught."

Harry nodded, he could remember most of the potion's instructions so it figured to be a rather easy class as long as Malfoy was kept in check. After quickly devouring two pieces of toast he washed down the remnants with the rest of his pumpkin juice before he glanced at his watch and flowed to his feet.

Helping Hermione to her feet he chuckled as Ron came stumbling into the hall hopeful to get some breakfast before the exam. Watching Ron's face fall as everyone had begun to leave to their first classes, Harry reached down and plucked a muffin from the table and tossed it to him just as he caught up to his friends.

Taking a big bite from the muffin Ron tried to speak, "mmff medy mr me meam."

Harry understood enough to follow Ron's muffled words, but he merely smiled as Hermione said, "Honestly Ronald, when are you going to learn that speaking is done best without food in your mouth?"

Harry chortled as Ron swallowed deliberately and replied, "I *said* or rather asked, are you ready for the exam?"

Harry decided to defuse any tension, "You remember how scared everyone was of me when I spoke to that snake?" Ron nodded with a confused look on his face, "Well, it's bloody terrifying listen to you talk with your mouth full of food."

Hermione grinned and even Ron couldn't help but flash a quick grin in response. Much as it had always been, in basic chemical terms Hermione was the acid, Ron had always been the basic part of the trio, and Harry acted as the buffer and by default he was also the catalyst for the balance of their adventures. It was what worked, even if they all had begun to mellow into slightly less volatile mixes as the years had progressed.

Nearly two hours later Harry, Hermione, and Ron walked out of the History classroom with expressions ranging from relief and quiet confidence (Harry), anxiety over one potential spelling error (Hermione), and finally dread over getting the exam back to coming week (Ron).

Harry looked at Hermione and laughed softly as he wrapped an arm around her waist before he said, "Oh come off it Hermione, I'm sure you got an O."

Hermione smiled slightly before she quizzed, "What did you get on number 15?"

Harry arched an eyebrow as she clarified, "It was the question about ministry doctrine and its changes after the reformation of the goblin nation."

Harry smiled, "I thought it was C but I guess I won't know for sure until we get them back." Seeing the relieved expression Hermione's face he continued, "You know, it really doesn't do anything but waste energy to worry about an exam after you hand it in Hermione."

Hermione frowned but nodded as Ron piped up, "You know, there are other people here, dreadfully depressed about the exam."

Harry rolled his eyes and with more than a hint of humor in his voice, "Yes, but you're worrying for a good reason and Hermione wasn't."

Hermione managed a small giggle at Ron's mock glare as they entered the great hall for lunch before heading down to the dungeons for potions with Snape and the Slytherins. As they sat at the Gryffindor table Harry and Hermione smiled as Neville and Ginny entered, Neville having went straight from the History classroom to pick up Ginny from Charms.

For some odd reason Ron had yet to put the obvious signs together to realize that his only sister was nearing her first relationship. Managing to swallow most of the food in his mouth before talking, "Hey I wonder why Neville is carrying Ginny's bag?"

Hermione gave Ron a horribly pitying look as Harry merely shook his head with amusement at Ron before both returned to their meals leaving a confused looking redhead in their wake. By the time Ron had turned to talk to Seamus and Dean, Lavender and Parvati had conspicuously sidled into the two seats directly across from Harry and Hermione.

Parvati and Lavender were giggling in such a way that infuriated Hermione to no end that she tersely said, "Could you two please stop giggling or at least move away so that the rest of us can eat in peace."

Lavender smirked, "We'll stop giggling if you two tell us what's going on between you two."

Hermione opened her mouth to fire back a scathing reply but was beat to the figurative punch by Harry, "How about this instead? You two go over there and leave us alone and you won't make either of us very unhappy."

Lavender and Parvati looked at Harry with something akin to shock, but the look in his eyes was no longer the playful young man that played Quidditch, but something darker and definitely more dangerous. As the girls walked away Hermione concernedly asked, "Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry merely shrugged, he had a vague inkling of what was upsetting him at the moment, but he certainly didn't want to start thinking about it at the moment. Hermione had a few years of reading Harry's emotions and despite popular opinion he never got upset for no reason like another one of her friends. In fact, if Harry was openly upset he typically had a very good reason for it. The problem was that Hermione found herself at a complete loss as to the why.

In typical fashion she began to catalog everything Harry had done the past few days, from studying for the History of Magic exam, *no that wasn't it*. Then he had helped her make the necklace for her mum's mother's day present... *Oh dear*. How could she have been so callous as to flaunt the fact that she had a mother in front of Harry?

As they entered the far side of the dungeon Hermione's rational mind kicked in, *ok Harry has never had a problem with mother's day in the past so it has to be something more specific, and more personal. Perhaps it was simply the making of the mother's day gift for her mother. No, Harry had enjoyed that throughout* and she would have noticed otherwise. *In fact, the only hint of anything but pleasure had come at the end of the night when she had said something silly before sending it off. But, what had she said? She could still remember the faint glimmer of a grimace*

The pungent odors of the potions classroom wafted into their nostrils as Hermione frantically began to search for the exact phrase that had sent Harry into this minor, well whatever it was. Just as they walked into the potions classroom it had come back to her. *"I told mum it was from both of us."* What about that statement could have sent Harry into the moping fit she was certain he was doing his best to conceal at the moment. Hermione sighed as she took her seat, as long as they could get through potions in one piece she could talk to Harry about it later.

Snape strode into the classroom with his robes billowing behind him before he merely flicked his wand and said, "Today you have simple strengthening draught. We have already reviewed the various properties of this potion so when you finish brewing you may leave after handing in a sample of your finished product."

Class seemed to be dragging as the strengthening draught was completed with plenty of time to spare by the vast majority of the class, save Crabbe and Goyle who after four years of potions making still were having problems creating the necessary magical fire.

As the three Gryffindors handed their final potions in Malfoy walked up from behind them with a telltale sneer on his face. Hermione took all of her will power to suppress a groan, *they had almost made it.* With a sudden flash of inspiration she grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him into the hallway to at least limit the potential damage any confrontation might result in.

Malfoy followed closely behind as an oblivious Ron stayed behind to wait for Lavender and Parvati about their divination homework due

the next week. Upon reaching the relative safety of the hallway Malfoy drawled, "So Potter, big weekend coming up eh?"

Harry tensed as Hermione pulled the equivalent of a mental moan of *No!* before she said, "Shove off Malfoy."

Malfoy continued apparently not heeding the sage advice of the bushy haired book witch, "I sent my mother a gift last night, how about you?"

Harry's jaw tightened and Hermione tried one last frantic attempt to stop Harry's rage storm, she wrapped her arms tightly around Harry and murmured into his ear, "Don't pay attention to him Harry. He's a flaming prat and he's just trying to get you into trouble."

Hermione felt the tension drain from Harry's body and she was about to sigh from sheer relief when Malfoy added, "You know Potter, hugging one mudblood doesn't mean you are hugging your mudblood mother. But, I guess you couldn't even if you wanted to."

Hermione sagged slightly, she quickly released Harry no longer fighting the battle to keep him from hexing Malfoy three ways to Sunday. Harry took two purposeful strides and in a manner suggesting magic would have been a woeful substitute he landed one fist into Malfoy's stomach and quickly followed it with an uppercut straight to the nose of the now doubled over Slytherin malcontent. It was eerily reminiscent of the slap Hermione had planted on Malfoy the previous year, although what this lacked in surprise it definitely made up for in impact.

Hermione gave Malfoy a quick glance to see if Harry had managed any permanent damage, but smiled when all she could see was a rather bloody and crooked nose on the shocked Slytherin's face. However, the smile evaporated when she realized that her moment to check Malfoy had been all the more Harry needed to evade her sight.

Sighing heavily she took off at a sprint hopeful to find Harry before he could get himself into any more trouble. Fortunately, she caught Harry just as he exited the dungeons and panting slightly she leaned against him, "Harry, would you like to talk about it?"

Harry stopped and leaned against a wall just outside of the great hall and in a flat tone he spoke "I reckon there isn't a lot to say. I'm an orphan, I always have been and I always will be. But hey it's ok they died so you can live, no guilt there."

Hermione was taken aback by the underlying bitterness in Harry's words, and she said, "I know that I can't really say anything to help Harry. But you know that if you ever need to talk to someone I can listen."

Harry sighed but he began to relax visibly. After a moment he was about to speak when Snape came barreling into sight as he screamed, "Potter, I want an explanation as to why Mr. Malfoy's nose has been broken."

Hermione decided once again to protect Harry as she answered, "Professor Snape, Malfoy was making fun of Harry because he couldn't send his mother anything for mother's day. Harry really showed a lot of restraint all things considered."

Snape's fury wasn't to be easily quenched however, as he said, "While I do in no way condone Mr. Malfoy's behavior, resorting to violence on Mr. Potter's part is no less acceptable. Regardless of the fact that he was provoked. However, I will leave the final punishments up to the headmaster in this case."

Even Hermione had to admit that Snape's solution was an equitable one as a moment later Malfoy holding a bloody rag on his face walked into the room. Snape shook his head and said, "Mr. Potter, I suggest you go to the headmaster's office right now. I will escort Mr. Malfoy to the headmaster's office after we make a short visit to the hospital wing."

Harry nodded before he turned to Hermione, "I'll be back in a bit, save my spot in the common room for me, ok?"

Hermione frowned but nodded, as much as she wanted to forever protect Harry from such things it was inevitable that Harry would have to confront his own problems alone from time to time. In fact, their friendship had always had a certain dichotomy when it came to

risking lives. In the end it always seemed to be Harry, and his friend's role had been to help him reach it.

Harry walked up the stairs to Dumbledore's office, prepared to face any punishment he would be given. It was rather simple really, one simply doesn't stand and listen as someone else makes snide comments about your dead mother and not get a face full of fist in return.

The door to Dumbledore's office was opened and the headmaster was sitting in his office with Professor McGonagall off to his side with a very stern look decorating her face. Harry sighed as he entered the room and he managed to mutter, "Hello."

If he had planned to say more no one would ever know as McGonagall burred, "Of all of the stupid and bone-headed stunts to pull Potter."

Dumbledore merely arched an eyebrow at his deputy headmistress who purpled but remained silent as he said in a much calmer tone, "We have received word from Professor Snape that you were involved in an altercation with Mr. Malfoy outside of the Potions classroom a few moments ago. Would you care to give us your explanation of the events?"

Harry frowned and after quickly recounting the comments of Malfoy that had driven him over the edge, both Dumbledore and McGonagall were only looking mildly disappointed in him and more than a touch angry about something else.

McGonagall simply said, "One week of detention that will be served with me Mr. Potter. Please do try to ignore Mr. Malfoy's ramblings in the future."

Harry simply nodded leaving the two professors to silently ponder Harry's actions in fuller detail before discussing it amongst each other finally Dumbledore spoke, "While Harry's actions required punishment, I admit that I would have acted accordingly if placed in his position."

McGonagall snapped back, "I feel the same way Albus, I mean the nerve of that little brat to demean Lily's memory and then make fun of Harry's lack of a mother. Why I have half a mind to punch the pompous little twit myself."

Dumbledore merely chuckled and replied, "I do believe that Harry got the point across very nicely in his own unique way Minerva." McGonagall could only sigh and nod as they awaited Snape and Malfoy from their side trip to the hospital wing.

Word of Harry's pummeling of Malfoy swept through the school, and the rumors were quashed just as quickly as Dumbledore made a small announcement at dinner one night. The detentions were served and the days of May continued to melt away. Harry could feel the impending weight of the third task settle firmly around his neck.

The final Thursday of May had come and during dinner Barty Crouch Sr. and Ludo Bagman requested the presence of the four champions just outside of the great hall at eight. Harry and Cedric met first outside of the great hall, having the least distance to travel.

Cedric sighed and asked, "So how has the training for the third task gone Harry?"

With a shrug Harry replied, "Actually I've had less training for this task than the other two. Everything has been mostly review aside from some strange sessions with the headmaster."

Cedric furrowed his brow, "Strange sessions?"

Harry merely shrugged, "It's not important really. He has shown me memories of the first deatheater trials and we've discussed them."

Cedric merely nodded, understanding there were simply some things that were left better undiscovered, and he simply said, "I reckon that would be useful for some people."

Harry laughed in a way that said that it was an understatement, but before he could form a verbal response the other two champions came into view along with Crouch and Bagman.

Crouch led the way as Bagman followed at a safe distance, apparently the little tiff from during the second task having had some lasting repercussions. Crouch's upper lip curled slightly upwards in a sad attempt at a smile before he said in a strained tone, "Follow Mr. Bagman and I out to the Quidditch pitch if you will."

As the older champions walked out ahead and appeared deep in discussion about plans and careers after graduation, Harry was left behind and it opened up a very awkward situation. Unfortunately this meant that Harry and Bagman were left in the rear as Crouch was in front of everyone.

"Listen Harry, I wanted to apologize for trying to force you to cheat for my own selfish gain. I've been forced to take a long hard look at myself and I've joined a muggle group for people with gambling problems. Anyways, I just wanted to say good luck with the task and I'm sure I'll be seeing you around." Bagman said in what appeared to be an earnest tone.

Harry sighed, he really had no inclination to be having such a conversation, and decided appeasement was the best course of action, "Thanks Mr. Bagman." Bagman appeared in fact appeased as he took off at a jog to catch up to Crouch and complete his ministry duties.

Harry absently played with his wand as he began to think about a rough game plan for how he would approach the task. It had come as a very welcome surprise when Harry had been informed by Ron nearly a week after the second task that every point he was in the lead meant a five second edge to begin. With over a minute head start.

As Harry neared the pitch he sped up his pace slightly to catch the others, and as he approached he heard a shout from Crouch. "I'm on to you Bagman, I know you're up to some kind of a scheme and when I find it out you'll be out of the ministry faster than you can say."

The other champions looked very uncomfortable and looked relieved to see Harry and the distraction he would provide. Crouch noticed this as well and leveled one last glare at Bagman that clearly indicated that it wasn't the last of their conversation.

Crouch motioned over to the hedges covering the Quidditch pitch and the grounds in the surrounding area before he spoke, "What you see before you is some idea of the scale of the third task. We have had ministry employees working on the various challenges of the maze you see before you for over a year. Yes, you've all heard me correctly; beyond the hedges in front of you lie a maze, which only ends when one of you finds the tri-wizard cup in its core. Now Mr. Potter has I believe just over a ninety-second advantage to begin the maze. Mr. Diggory and Mr. Krum and finally Ms. Delacoeur will follow him. We will be holding the third task at dusk on June the 24th, good luck with your preparations and may Merlin be with you."

As Harry walked back to the castle in the failing light he sighed and muttered to himself, "Well, this causes some problems."

A/N: Ok well next chapter we have the final preparations for the third task and I will take you all of the way to the front of the maze. It will be a little longer wait for the next chapter because I will be returning to college at the end of the week to prepare for another semester.

I would like some input on what everyone thought of the fledgling Remus and Tonks we had this chapter. Personally it was one of the few things I liked about HBP, in that we finally had a woman for old Remus.

The Ron content was sparse this chapter but he will be a major part of next chapter, of that much I assure you. The Harry and Hermione ship will officially set sail next chapter also. Ugh, I don't want to say anymore or I'll have to write it right now!

Thanks to all of you that have reviewed and thanks for reading.

Chapter 17

It was the usual setting of the Gryffindor common room, but following Harry's conversation with Hermione about the maze the bushy haired witch had begun to disappear into the library for every spare moment. While Harry's school work had improved markedly over the course of the year, he still lacked the drive to spend so much time in the library as the previously mentioned muggleborn book witch.

Instead Harry found himself comfortably seated in one of the plush arm chairs in the common room as he sat directly across from a very shocked looking Ron Weasley.

Ron had apparently recovered from his shock enough to say, "Bloody hell Harry, you mean to say that Ginny and Neville have snogged!"

Harry sighed, Ron was one of his best friends in the entire world, but he could be so insufferably thick some times it simply grated on his nerves. After a moment to squelch those thoughts he replied, "Yes I imagine they have Ron. After all they have been dating for a couple of weeks now."

Ron purpled, Harry couldn't tell if it was from oxygen deprivation or nearly bursting a blood vessel, but eventually the redhead said, "I reckon it could be worse, she could be getting on with Malfoy or some nonsense."

Harry arched an eyebrow, "Come on Ron give your sister a little credit."

Ron shook his head, "No mate, you don't understand. Ginny has always had this wild side about her. Trust me when I say she probably wrote in the diary in spite of what dad had told her countless times in the past about magical objects that can communicate."

Harry frowned in thought, so Ginny had a wild side, that much would definitely explain much of her behavior her first year beyond the diary's influence. Once again Harry was painfully reminded of how naïve and blind he had been his first three years at Hogwarts.

After a moment he shrugged and asked, "Actually that reminds me of something I wanted to ask you mate."

Ron furrowed his brow in thought and he muttered, "Oh?"

Harry sighed heavily before he bit the figurative bullet, "I'm going to ask Hermione to be my girlfriend next week before the third task. I reckon you might have or had some feelings for her and I just wanted to tell you first."

Ron ran a fitful hand through his hair, Harry's words weren't exactly unexpected and yet in a way they still stabbed right through his center. No, it wasn't the fact that Harry would be dating Hermione. In fact, Ron had come to realize recently that his crush on Hermione from the previous year had been as much about not being left behind as any actual feelings for her. The real thing that was troubling Ron at the moment was the potential of another wall being built between himself and his friends. Ron may be thick in emotional matters, but he wasn't exactly blind and he was well aware that Harry and Hermione were becoming a unit on their own. The fact the he was being left behind, was ultimately what hurt the most.

After a moment Ron said in a quiet voice, very unusual, almost disquietingly so for the boisterous redhead as he said, "I understand."

Of all of the answers Harry expected, a far bit of those involving some sort of an explosion, the quiet answer by Ron disconcerted him more than anything else could have. After a long moment of thought Harry for once said the perfect words, "Tell me what's bothering you mate."

Ron managed a rueful grin, "I reckon this might be something worth answering eh?"

Harry merely nodded, patiently waiting for Ron's next response. It was a testament to Ron's new maturity that he didn't just blurt out the first thought in his head. It may have been five minutes it may have been an hour as far as Ron knew, before he said, "It isn't that I necessarily fancy Hermione, or ever have for that matter. I guess it's more that I can see the three of us growing apart, and if you two become a couple it will only get worse. I mean people might think I'm

thick but I've noticed the difference since I saw you two before the World Cup."

Harry blinked after realizing that was all Ron had to say, with a deep breath he simply said, "It wasn't possible for things to stay the same forever Ron. But, you have to know that you are always going to be one of my dearest friends and I'm sure Hermione would say the same if you asked her."

Ron nodded before glancing around, "By the way, where is Hermione?"

Harry grinned wryly, "She's taken residence in the library since I told her about the maze for the third task. I imagine she's looking for a miracle spell that will solve the maze for me."

Ron merely chuckled fondly, Hermione was many things, but she was predictable in her need to protect and help Harry if nothing else. With both of their minds cleared from some of the burdens that had been bothering them, they lapsed in a companionable silence.

June dawned lazily around the castle; for once Binns would be unable to attend class for the day due to an obligation with the council of the dead. Therefore it was a sleep tousel Harry that meandered into the great hall later than normal Tuesday morning.

Hermione had already been up for over an hour, her excitement from a discovery the previous night overwhelming any urges she might have had to sleep. Of course most of that excitement had been set aside due to a most interesting edition of the daily prophet.

On the cover was an old stock photo of Barty Crouch Jr., much like the one they had used during the manhunt for Sirius a year earlier. The article read:

Ministry Cover-up or You-Know-Who's return

By: Rita Skeeter

After some heavy investigative research I have come across classified ministry documents that indicate that certain unspecified

individuals had knowledge of Barty Crouch Jr.'s escape from Azkaban prison. The document does not clarify who it may be, but it is safe to assume it is an individual with great clout.

It is commonly known that Barty Crouch Jr. was disowned by then head of the DMLE, Barty Crouch Sr. following his unveiling as a servant of he-who-must-not-be-named. However, many of the older family members in the Wizengamot suggested lesser sentences for all of the deatheaters on trial aside from one Sirius Black. Interestingly enough research turned up evidence that Black was denied a trial. Perhaps this was another cover-up or example of ministry corruption as well?

Similar cover-upswere prevalent during you-know-who's first reign of terror, perhaps the death of he-who-must-not-be-named was an exaggeration as well. There is little doubt that tough times lie ahead, do we wish to enter these dark times with current leadership in place? This reporter is undecided and only hopes time will tell a favorable tale.

Hermione re-read the article for what must have been the tenth time as she spotted Harry entering the great hall. Sitting down with a sleep drunken grin he wordlessly accepted the daily prophet from Hermione as she grabbed him some food for his breakfast. A moment later she poured him a small glass of pumpkin juice as she watched his brow furrow while reading the article of importance. Suddenly her exciting news flashed back into her consciousness, and she was split as to what to say first.

Deciding to tackle the obvious she said, "Maybe this article could get someone to look into a trial on Sirius' behalf Harry. If nothing else it puts the ministry in a tenuous situation. Everything they do from now on will be looked at more closely by the general wizarding populace."

Harry took a sip of his juice before he took a large bite of his toast as he chewed thoughtfully, or at least as thoughtfully as one can chew, "You're right, hopefully something good can come from Rita's reporting skills. By the way, did she?" Harry gestured aimlessly conveying his message without actually saying the words.

Hermione shook her head, “No she didn’t; we’ll just have to chalk this one up to actual investigative reporting.”

Harry nodded and with a smile Hermione continued, “I found a spell that should work perfectly for the maze, and I even adjusted it to make it work better. If how it worked in the library is any indication then you should have a big advantage for the maze.”

Harry wrapped an arm around Hermione’s shoulder leaning his head over to touch hers and he murmured, “You’re definitely too good for me Hermione.”

Hermione blushed but she murmured in response, “Well yes, but I imagine you make it up to me from time to time.”

Harry leaned in and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before he returned to his breakfast; yes it was definitely time to take that next step with Hermione. After a moment Harry queried, “When do you want to practice the spell?”

Hermione smiled sweetly and replied, “Actually, seeing as how we have no class this morning, I was thinking after we finished breakfast we could find an empty classroom to practice it.”

True to form Harry and Hermione found themselves in one of the many abandoned classrooms in the school. Hermione had sealed the door as Harry put up a variety of privacy and muffling charms. The extra training for the year shining through, as hints of Moody’s paranoia shone clearly in Harry’s subconscious and liberal use of the spells for a seemingly mundane matter.

Hermione merely rolled her eyes as she asked with a grin, “Are you quite done then?”

Harry nodded with a grin as Hermione explained, “The biggest problem in any maze is getting turned around and losing your sense of direction. So I’ve been looking absolutely everywhere for a compass spell of some sort. Finally I found the spell in a book of wilderness survival magic by a crazy wizard by the name of Bartleby the Grizzled. It’s called the four point spell, or rather the compass spell.”

Harry nodded and then asked, "So what's the wand movement and incantation?"

Hermione grinned as she raised her hand, "Relax Harry, remember I said that I had managed to adjust the spell?" Harry nodded and she continued, "Well, the new spell does a little bit more than merely work as a compass."

Harry frowned, "And?"

Hermione put her hands on her hips, "Let me have my moment here Harry?"

Harry grinned sheepishly as her expression softened, "Tell me Harry, have you ever heard of a divining rod?" Harry shook his head confusedly and she explained, "It's more of a muggle thing, but basically in times of great draught sticks deemed diving rods were used to find underground water reserves."

Harry's face dawned a flicked of recognition as she continued, apparently satisfied with his response, "What I designed the enhanced version of the spell do is seek out the signature of a magical object you say and treat it as due north on the compass."

Harry's mask of confusion quickly shifted as he grinned, "So I can use it to direct me to the tri-wizard's cup."

Hermione smiled, "Exactly Harry. Now, would you like to learn the spell?" Harry nodded eagerly and she lectured, "The enhanced spell involves making a five pointed star motion with your wand as you intone, 'Point me'. Now, if you want to find something specific you simply add the name of that object into the spell name. Go ahead and try it Harry."

Harry glanced around the room until his eyes settled upon a dictation quill sitting on the teacher's desk near the far wall of the room. With a deep breath he made the proper wand movement and said, "Point me quill."

Harry's wand jerked in his hand as it tracked across the room until it was directly pointing at the quill on the desk. With a whistle Harry

spoke with more than a touch of admiration in his voice, "Just when I think you can't get any more brilliant you break this out on me."

Hermione blushed as she playfully said, "Oh come off it Harry, I didn't even go back in time or anything to figure this one out."

Harry grinned as he pompously said, "Details, mere details my dear." With a crooked grin he picked Hermione up by her waist and twirled her around a couple of times before sitting her down and swaying slightly from dizziness.

After a moment to compose himself his expression turned from a grin to a nervous frown as he asked, "Hermione, do you think we're ready?"

The smile on Hermione's face left no doubt in Harry's mind as to her answer but he wordlessly asked for it anyways. Hermione captured Harry's hands as she softly replied, "Yeah I think we are."

Harry's nervousness melted away as he asked with a huge grin, "Hermione would you like to be my girlfriend."

Hermione grinned, "Yeah, I think I can manage that." Looping her hands around Harry's neck she pulled him into their first kiss as a couple. For at least one wonderful moment in time, the worries of the future ceased to exist.

Hogwarts had certainly served as a place of great change for the school year, and despite the fact that it pained Severus Snape to admit it Harry Potter was the catalyst for most of the change.

Severus was sitting in his personal quarters as he graded a set of first year essays and he sipped on a glass of Brandy. As the dark mark on his left forearm continued to come back darker and darker he knew it was time to throw in his final lot. Would he stick with Albus and Potter, who by all intents and purposes had more strength than the dark lord? But, ultimately the two still lacked the win at all contest attitude that made the dark lord the terrible enemy that he was.

On the other hand the dark lord would be fighting a war with considerably less resources if Potter and Albus could stay united. The

ministry might have its pure blood supremacy champions, but they would be weeded out in time, meaning the ministry would be against the dark lord as well.

As he took another sip of his brandy he suddenly realized that he would finally need to throw his lot all of the way in with the order of the phoenix. Maybe it was indeed time to let go of the pain of the past, because if he continued his petty little grudge with Potter it would be self-defeating at best.

Regrets, oh he had plenty of regrets regarding his behavior in the past. Had he ever truly felt it was fair how he had treated Harry? No, and for that loathed himself for throwing years of anger at an 11-year-old child. What was almost more unforgivable was that his anger and resentment of James Potter had nothing to do with the child in the first place.

It was much the same with Black and Lupin, he had held on to that anger and contempt for so long and what had it gotten him? Despised by many, loved by none, and the few he could call friends he had treated poorly for the most part. It would be a long road ahead to a life he could be proud of, but then again anything worth having, was also worth fighting for.

With a groan at what this would mean for him, Severus downed the half a glass of brandy remaining and with a grimace set aside the assignments to figure out exactly how to make his allegiance clear. It would involve swallowing his pride, something Severus Snape had never been good at, but in the end it would hopefully justify itself.

If Severus Snape was having a hard time, then Draco Malfoy was having an equally hard go of things after his last failure to beat Potter. His father had heard of the humiliation and promised some rather unusual punishment for sullyng the family name upon his return to Malfoy Manor. The punishment most likely involved some liberal dosages of the cruciatus curse; after all, his father had never been that imaginative with his punishments in the past.

That wasn't hurt the most in the letter from his father however, it was the simple statement that Draco lacked the patience and talent to truly belong in Slytherin. For any Slytherin that was perhaps the

gravest and most insulting statement that could be made. Those words alone had Draco completely reanalyzing who he was as a wizard and as a Malfoy. Patience was going to become synonymous with the name Draco Malfoy, and when the time came Harry Potter would learn to fear him before the end.

The days progressed and while the tension at Hogwarts was growing with each day the tension at Riddle Manor was becoming beyond unbearable.

“Wormtail I have had enough of you sniveling. What news do we have of our spy at Hogwarts and his progress?” Voldemort sneered, he was still in the form of a baby, but even by sight one could tell his power was returning with each passing day.

Peter Pettigrew trembled in the corner of the room; he was a more powerful wizard than he had ever given himself credit for. But, that was simply what he was, a weak person. If ever a person was designed to follow a powerful personality it was him, and that was simply the state of things.

After a moment Wormtail managed to control the chattering of his teeth enough to answer, “I’m-m sorry mas-ster the spy informs you that his plans go according to design. The tri-wizard cup will be turned into a portkey that will only activate when Potter touches it. The other boy will be placed under the imperius as you requested to prevent any interference from the other champions, master.”

Voldemort rubbed his stubby hands together in glee as his ominous red eyes glowed brighter until he said, “Excellent Wormtail, and with Potter gone the rest will follow.”

Harry awoke with a start, his scar was throbbing and with a feeling of dread he realized that Voldemort had to be extremely happy about something. It wasn’t a full vision, meaning his Occlumency had worked but it was enough to unsettle Harry enough that he couldn’t get back to sleep for the rest of the night.

Finally, the morning dawning the day of the third task had come and Harry rolled out of bed happy with the knowledge that he had worked ahead on Transfiguration and Defense against the dark arts, meaning

he could skip classes as he mentally prepared for the third and final task of the tri-wizard tournament.

The one glaring negative of skipping classes was that he couldn't spend any time with Hermione aside from the breaks between classes. Fortunately, classes were ending at 4 pm to give everyone sufficient time to eat dinner before going down to the stands by the Quidditch pitch.

Harry had informed Dumbledore, Hermione, and the marauders of the spike of glee he had felt from Voldemort nearly two weeks earlier and it affected each of those people differently. Dumbledore had merely nodded, his warnings of caution ringing as clearly as Moody's mantra of constant vigilance ever had before.

With his newly formed relationship with Hermione her reaction had been by far the most surprising. She had become very clingy initially before that faded and she was much more openly affectionate than she had ever been before. Granted the affection still fell on the conservative side of things, but there was rarely a spare moment where she wasn't holding his hand or cuddling on the couch in the common room with him. Of course, Hermione was also none too subtly making her final claim clear to the girls of the school while she enjoyed being close to Harry. It just so happened to be one of those happy coincidences.

The marauders had been extremely pensive about the entire thing, but they merely told Harry in a letter to trust his instincts. With that in mind it had come as a great surprise when Harry walked down into the great hall and saw Remus, Snuffles, Ron, Hermione, and the Grangers (Dumbledore had granted them access around the muggle repelling charms) sitting at one of four tables in place of the staff table.

Walking up to the table Harry sat between Hermione and Remus, "So, this is a pleasant surprise."

Hermione gave him a quick kiss on the cheek as he sat before she said, "Professor Dumbledore and the other headmasters wanted to give each of the champions a surprise. So the headmaster invited some people that you were close to."

Harry grinned before he turned to the Grangers and said, "Hello Mr. and Mrs. Granger. How is the year going for you?"

Bianca smiled as she leaned across the table and grasped Harry's hand, "We're doing fine Harry dear. We heard the wonderful news, and I just wanted to say that you are very good for each other."

Harry smiled and nodded as Mrs. Granger settled back into her chair before Harry turned to Remus and said, "How about you Remus? Padfoot tells me you have a new girlfriend."

Remus blushed lightly but he strongly replied, "Yes I am, in fact I'm sure you probably saw her at the second task. She's an auror."

Hermione bit her lip before she asked, "Was she the auror with the pink spiky hair?"

Remus grinned, "Yeah that was her, but don't let the hair fool you she's a metamorphagus."

Hermione looked quite excited and launched into a series of questions about metamorphagus as Harry looked over at Ron and asked, "I figured your mum and maybe dad might be here too."

Ron shook his head, "My mum is still wound up how horrid she was earlier this year. She didn't think it would be proper to come until she could talk to you and Hermione somewhere in private. Dad will be at the task tonight and I think he said Bill might be coming too. Supposedly they are going to broadcast it on the WWN tonight so don't do anything stupid."

Harry chuckled, "I'll certainly try my hardest."

After Harry spent a fair amount of time giving Snuffles' head a good rubbing behind the ears before he glanced around at the other champion's tables. Fleur's table was filled with silver haired people that it was plain to see were her family. The little girl Harry had rescued during the second task waved at Harry excitedly and blushed as Harry waved back. He never noticed the younger girl's frown when Harry leaned over and gave Hermione a quick kiss on the cheek.

Viktor's table was filled with severe looking people with dark hair and more than their fair share of frowns and grimaces. Harry absently wondered if they taught frowns at Durmstrang as he waved and nodded to Viktor who returned the gesture in kind.

Cedric's table had the fewest people seated as Cedric, Cho, Amos Diggory, and Mrs. Diggory and kind looking woman rounded out those seated. Harry made eye contact with Cedric and they shared a jaunty wave and grin before both returned to what was going on at their own respective tables.

After a few moments Hermione sighed and said, "I have to go to class, but I'll turn in your assignment to Professor McGonagall. Make sure you relax today okay sweets?"

Giving him one last quick peck on the lips she grabbed Ron by the arm and they joined the bulk of the other students in the hall as they went to their first class for the day. Glancing around at the others remaining at the table Harry grinned, "Who's up for a tour of the castle this morning?"

Bianca and Michael look thrilled and Remus had a peculiar grin on his face as he said, "Let's start on the seventh floor Harry, there is actually something I'd like to show you."

If anyone had been fortunate enough to witness the rag tag group as they walked the halls of the school, they would have had the pleasure of seeing a werewolf, the boy-who-lived, a grim animagus, and a pair of muggles walking the halls of Hogwarts for the first time ever in its one thousand year existence.

While the Granger couldn't see the ghosts as they floated through the castle, the various portraits could be enjoyed and they particularly found Sir Cadogan hilarious as he challenged them to a duel with his helmet on backwards. Finally reaching the seventh floor Remus led the group away from the Gryffindor tower and towards the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.

Remus smiled and said, "You all stay here, and trust me it will be well worth it." Remus paced in front of the door three times before a door appeared to Harry and the Granger's amazement. Remus turned to

the assembled people and gestured with his hand as he opened the door. The entire group quickly shifted into the room, an exact replica of Remus' defense classroom from the year before.

Remus answered the unasked question of the group, save Snuffles, "This is what we all liked to call the room of requirement back in our reprobate days at Hogwarts. It is actually quite useful if you just need to get away from everything."

Bianca asked, "So what is this room supposed to be then?"

Remus turned to Harry who grinned, "This is what the defense classroom from last year looked like Mrs. Granger. Remus was our professor for Defense, I'm sure Hermione mentioned it to you."

Michael grinned, "Well she only mentioned it about a million times. She was always raving about how nice it was to have a proper defense instructor for once. Well she would squeeze it into her letters after going into detail about Harry's latest hijinx at any rate."

Everyone had a quick laugh about this before Remus solemnly said, "Seriously Harry, only show this to people you can trust, because in the wrong hands some serious evil can be done here."

Harry merely nodded, "Ok, why don't we show you the Gryffindor common room and we can wait for Hermione to get back from class. She can join us as we show you the rest of the castle."

After a leisurely walk back to the Gryffindor common room the fat lady perked up at the appearance of guests. She smiled serenely, "Ah Mr. Lupin it has been many years since you've walked through me. Why, that dog of your looks very familiar. Have I seen him before?"

Remus and Harry were frozen as they grasped for an appropriate excuse, but Michael having heard the tale, being full aware of who their canine accompaniment was replied, "Oh I imagine not dear lady, old Snuffles has been in our family for years so you wouldn't have seen him here."

The fat lady merely nodded as Harry muttered the password and the group entered the common room with a collective sigh. Michael

merely said, "It took me a minute to gather what the problem was, but I hope we've dealt with any potential issues."

Harry grinned as they all took residence around the couch in the common room and chatted about magic, wizard's chess, and life in general until Hermione returned. Around eleven the portrait hole swung open and Seamus and Dean merely waved as they took their bags up to the dorm. Dragging up the rear Hermione appeared in deep thought until she spotted the motley crew in the common room.

With a very un-Hermione like squeal she rushed over and gave her parents big hugs before she breathlessly asked, "What have you all been doing so far?"

Harry winked and replied, "It's a big secret, but I'll tell you for a kiss." Hermione complied and he mischievously said, "Actually all we've done is tour the seventh floor, we were waiting for you."

Hermione mock gasped, "Why Mr. Potter, already resorting to stealing kisses. What will I ever do with you?"

The adults all made chocking sounds to break the twins from their flirting as Remus said, "Why don't we do a quick tour of the rest of the castle and visit Hagrid. I'm sure Michael and Bianca would enjoy that."

After doing a quick once over of the castle they were out on the grounds heading towards Hagrid's hut as Harry and Hermione pointed out the place where they had their first flying lesson, where they had first began their adventure that fateful night a year ago, and even the lake where they had taken many a walk around during the current school year.

Finally reaching Hagrid's hut Harry gave the door a firm rap and yelled, "Hagrid it's Harry and Hermione, we've brought some guests we thought you might like to meet."

A moment later Hagrid's thundering footsteps could be heard as the large door to his hut swung open and his black eyes peered over the group before he jovially said, "Ah Remus, good to see yer old friend. I

reckon this must be 'Ermione's parents. Great man that Dumbledore figuring out how to get yer here."

As Hagrid welcomed everyone in to his hut they chatted away the rest of the afternoon, Hagrid sharing his stories about Harry and Hermione that reminded him so much of the close bond James and Lily had shared. Hermione had to beg off around one in order to make it to defense with Moody on time and gave Harry a kiss, wishing him good luck if she couldn't give it later. By three and everyone's tea had gone cold Harry said, "As much fun as this has been I think I have to start preparing for the task tonight."

Harry went to his room and he began to suit up for the third task. Putting on the dragonhide vest that Sirius had sent a few weeks earlier Harry sighed before strapping on the wrist wand holster that he himself had purchased on the last Hogsmeade trip. Harry was cinching up the baggy pants used for the Champion's uniforms when Dobby popped into the room. Dobby was holding a sword and a scabbard that was easily his size as he nervously said, "Master Harry Potter sir. Headmaster Dumbly wanted Dobby to be giving Master Harry his sword for the task. Dumbly tells Dobby that scabby will hold swords and isn't be weighing much."

Harry nodded as he took the scabbard from Dobby and slid the familiar hilt of Gryffindor's sword out before sliding it back into place with a satisfied grin. Latching the scabbard over his body Harry pulled the clasp closed as he took some deep breaths before noticing that it was nearly time for the champions to report down to the Quidditch pitch to go over the ground rules for the task.

Nearly two hours later the sun was beginning to drift down towards the horizon, and with a glance at his watch Harry noticed it was nearly nine at night. The crowds were filled as the champions were led out the field near one of the four entrances of the maze. The various entrances were drawn from a hat and Harry was on the far left nearest to the stands as an anxious looking Ludo Bagman began to announce the ceremonies to the crowd.

Harry glanced around and gave nervous smiles to Hermione, Remus, Snuffles, Ron, Gryffindor house as a whole, and the Grangers before

he heard Bagman conclude, "Mr. Potter will begin at the sound of the shot. Let's everyone join in and give all of these tremendous champions a round of applause. For all of you listening at home, please join in as we celebrate some of the best and brightest teenagers of their age."

After a lengthy session of applause Bagman said, "Mr. Potter, please begin at the gunshot."

Crouch Sr. raised his wand and a tremendously loud gunshot rang through the stadium. Taking one last glance around Harry expelled a breath as he entered the maze, his wand gripped tightly in his fingers.

A/N: Next chapter will be a very lengthy third task, leading us right to the Tri-wizard cup and the exposure of who our deatheater was impersonating. I've tried to lay down several hints throughout the story, but we shall see if I can surprise any of you.

Now, the question of the chapter is a rather simple one, and one which is near and dear to my fanfiction heart. What about Ron Weasley's characterization makes him such a polarizing character?

I am very sure that many of you have caught one of my anti-canon Ron Weasley diatribes, but I confess that I do not hate Ron Weasley. But, I do hate JK Rowling's incessant need to build him up in ways unbecoming his actual worth and ability in the books. There is much more, but I will leave it to personal reviews.

Thanks to all of you that have read, and thanks to all of you that have reviewed and will review in the future.

Chapter 18

Barty Crouch Sr. managed to stifle a sigh as he signaled the start of the third task of the tri-wizard tournament. He was in a very tenable situation given that he had indeed aided his son's escape from Azkaban prison a few years earlier. In fact, he had been forced to hold the whelp under the imperius curse just to keep the brainwashed idiot from running off to find his master.

Now the coincidences were becoming too frequent to deny it, the dark lord was returning from whatever hell he had been ensnared that fateful Halloween all of those years earlier. First it had been Bertha Jorkins, and then the attack at the Quidditch World Cup followed by the casting of the dark mark by his son. Barty was also well aware that Cornelius would lean to whatever side offered the largest bribes, most likely Lucius Malfoy, as had become the practice since the deatheater trials over a decade ago.

Barty knew that he still had some pull in the ministry, and if he rebuilt a few burnt bridges he could possibly challenge Cornelius for power even without the seat of minister. After all he had only been head of the DMLE and had basically run the ministry during Voldemort's first rise to power. It wouldn't be easy, and it certainly wasn't without big payoffs if he succeeded, but he knew that the odds of defeating Voldemort would increase greatly if he managed to wrest the power away from Fudge.

As he watched the small dot on the map that represented Potter approach his first obstacle, he could only run a tired hand over his face; the coming months would require him at the top of his game.

Harry was jogging through the dense hedges making up the maze, carefully watching for any signs of danger when he came around a bend and spotted a sight he had long ago thought was gone never to be seen again.

There stood the enormous three-headed dog, a beast that in mythology had guarded the very gates of hell, but a pet named Fluffy by Hagrid. With a fleeting grin Harry thought of Hagrid's penchant for extremely dangerous animals, and almost rolled his eyes as he

though that it wasn't the animals but perhaps it was the danger that had cemented his very friendship with the half giant.

Shaking his head from his random and completely inappropriate thoughts, Harry knew what he needed to do. Finding a loose stick hanging from the hedges Harry quickly transfigured it into a very simple but functional flute. With a grin he vaguely registered the trip to the library second year that Hermione had spear-headed to figure out the nature of the spell that Quirrel had used on the harp months earlier.

With a simple flick of his wand the flute was levitating as he quickly slashed his wand at the flute and uttered, "*Pax lullaby*." Immediately the flute began to play the smooth harmonies of a child's lullaby and Fluffy's eyes began to droop. Harry vaguely heard a shot in the distance indicating that Cedric and then Krum would be off now as well.

With a quick disillusioning charm Harry snuck around Fluffy and reached the first fork in the maze. While Hermione's charm had been brilliant it in no way guaranteed that Harry would find the cup first. Mazes had numerous dead ends and despite knowing the general direction of the tri-wizard cup he had no guarantee that one way would ultimately be better than the other.

Throwing caution to the wind Harry made the five pointed star motion of the spell and incanted, "*Point me* Tri-wizard cup." His wand immediately pointed to the right, so Harry shrugged before he began to jog once again towards the next challenge the maze would provide.

Out in the stands, Hermione and Ron were sharing worried looks every time Bagman announced Harry's progress. If it was possible Hermione was actually greatly relieved when the Cerberus was announced as Harry's first obstacle. After a quick explanation to her parents about how they had learned the proper spell to subdue such a beast, she watched as Fleur finally entered the maze to begin her own pursuit of the cup.

It had been fifteen minutes of anxious jogging since his conquest over Fluffy, and Harry was beginning to wonder if magic had been used to enlarge the maze to even greater size. As the final flickers of sunlight

were disappearing through the hedges Harry finally encountered his second challenge of the maze.

There in the middle of the path hovered a dementor even worse than the ones that had resided outside of Hogwarts a year prior. The largest difference between this variety of dementor and the others was the presence of two visible crimson red eyes sunken back into the hood of the wraith.

Harry felt the telltale cold of a nearby dementor and was prepared to cast his patronus when suddenly the red eyes of the dementor became more familiar, the creature was a cross between the most frightening aspects of Voldemort and a dementor. *Of course*, Harry exclaimed in his thoughts before he verbalized, "I know what you are, you're a boggart." With a smile on his face Harry waved his wand and said, "Riddikulus." The spell connected to the chest of the creature and with a hiss the creature shifted into baboon. Harry chuckled as the boggart ran past him and began to climb the hedges in an attempt to get away from the scary wizard.

Across the maze Fleur Delacoeur was screaming and pleading for help. Her fellow champion Viktor Krum had attacked her once viciously, and by the dead look in his eyes she had no desire what the next attack might involve.

Putting her hands up in an attempt to placate the burly Bulgarian she said, "Viktor please, zis is a mistake. Ve are enemies, do not do something you will regret."

Viktor merely listlessly continued his march until all Fleur felt were a pair of strong hands on her neck before something hard struck the back of her head and then the darkness took hold. The champions all glanced up as the telltale red sparks were shot into the air indicating that one of the champions was withdrawing from the competition. Little did the other two champions know that it had been facilitated by one of their own.

Harry's confrontation with the boggart was announced along with Fleur's mysterious elimination under announced 'suspicious circumstances'. The sober expressions of the Beauxbatons faithful was drowned out as many people laughed riotously at the mental

image of a baboon loose within the maze. Bagman suddenly began to cough and clutch at his sides in a good attempt at mimicking the gales of laughter others were having, before he passed the magical microphone to Crouch Sr. and quickly ran from the stadium.

Hermione and Ron shared a quick and startled look as they watched Bagman began to undergo the restorative transformation accustomed to those that had used polyjuice potion before. Almost in a frantic tone she leaned over to Remus and whispered, "Remus, Bagman has been polyjuiced. He must have done something in the maze."

Remus frowned noticeably as he quickly replied, "I'll follow him, you, Ron and, Snuffles keep an eye on things from here."

The Grangers remained wisely silent even though they were a mess of emotions, for once observing the dangers of this world first hand. Hermione's hands wrung nervously as she listened to Crouch continue the commentary of the task.

Remus cursed as he had to move into a near sprint to stay within hearing and sight range of Bagman as the man had garnered a large gap by the time the werewolf had worked his way through the crowd and stands. Remus watched as Bagman began to slow his pace and clutch at his sides even more convulsively.

Remus glanced skyward as he muttered under his breath, "Why can't things just go right for once?"

As the polyjuiced Bagman neared the edge of the wards for the castle he took a quick glance around, never noticing Remus in the edge of the shadow and out of plain sight. The transformation was finally completed as the man nervously glanced around, his face suddenly illuminated by the moonlight. Remus cast a tracking charm on the man just before he disappeared, the only thing the marauder knew without a doubt was that the man that had just vanished most definitely was not Ludo Bagman.

In the maze Harry had resumed his march towards the tri-wizard cup, the modified compass spell showing the obvious signs that he was growing closer to the end prize as it took less time to align itself each time.

He knew that one champion had already been eliminated, and with the way the other tasks had played out, well he was fairly certain Fleur had been eliminated by one of her challenges in the maze. That still left his stoutest competition and Harry had no real idea as to their progress.

Any further musings into his relative progress were stalled as he rounded a curve in the bend to reveal a clearing with what appeared to be a sphinx guarding the next passage leading towards the tri-wizard cup. Harry frowned as he cautiously approached the creature, from what he remembered a sphinx was a very dangerous creature used to guard something precious. In this case the next portion of the maze leading to the tri-wizard cup.

The sphinx eyed Harry warily as he approached before it announced, "Stop now wizard, you must answer three challenges to your wit before you may continue."

Harry sighed heavily as he vividly remembered Hermione's statement from their first year indicating that few witches or wizards used logic. After a moment to gather his thoughts he replied, "Right then, will you please give me the challenges so that I may pass?"

The sphinx appeared rather amused by Harry response before it queried, "Only one color, but not one size,

stuck at the bottom, yet easily flies. Present in sun, but not in rain,
Doing no harm, and feeling no pain.

What is it?"

Running a hand through his sweaty hair, Harry began to go over the lines of the riddle hopeful to find the answer.

Present in sun but not in rain....

Stuck at the bottom....

Only one color.....

Harry began to think of something only present in sun....*clouds...no that's stupid, focus Harry. Rain...rain means no sun so its darker out. Bottom....what is at the bottom and only present in sun.*

Harry began to picture himself on a sunny day as he glanced around at the ground in his thoughts and the answer struck him so swiftly he blurted out, "It's a shadow!"

The sphinx's amusement with Harry was even further piqued as it replied, "Correct young wizard. Now for your second challenge is one with numbers, you may make yourself comfortable and write what I speak."

Harry nodded as he quickly transfigured a leaf into a piece of parchment, a twig into a pencil, and a rock into a flat backed surface on which to write. Apparently accepting this as permission to continue the Sphinx said, "You are in possession of a three liter jug and a five liter jug at the edge of a lake, can you measure exactly 4 liters of water only using the two jugs? If so, how can you do so?"

Harry frowned in thought as he wrote the question down and began to figure out the best means to accomplish the task. After trying several times to grasp the question an answer slowly began to enter his mind.

Fill the three liter jug and pour it into the five liter jug twice. This will leave exactly one liter in the three liter jug. Then fill the five gallon jug and....no that's not it.

I was close there. Hmm...ah I see take the one liter from the three liter jug and pour it into the five liter jug. Then refill the three liter jug and pour it into the five liter jug leaving exactly four liters in the jug!

After Harry's explanation the sphinx nodded, "That is correct young wizard. Two challenges have fallen at your wit; the third is the hardest so prepare for it."

Harry rolled his eyes as his supplies vanished with a flick of his wand, and he slowly stood back up all the while shaking his leg that had partially fallen asleep. The sphinx patiently asked, "I'm white, round, but not always around. Sometimes I am half, sometimes I am whole,

and sometimes a slice of me is all you will know. Sometimes I am light, sometimes I am dark, and sometimes I am both. Everyone wants to walk on me but only a few ever have. What am I?"

Harry had the equivalent of a mental snort as he quickly dismissed his first thought of Dudley, when the sphinx had mentioned white and round. As Harry discovered the answer he idly wondered how many non-muggleborn witches or wizards would have understood the walking portion of the riddle. Harry shook his head; now that his brain had been warmed up it would be difficult to react as quickly to any other physical tasks, "You're the moon!"

The sphinx merely bowed respectfully before it lifted up its front haunches and slid over to allow Harry through to the next passage. Harry breathed a sigh of relief before he returned to his more reactive state and jogged past the sphinx to the next challenge.

Crouch boomed out on his magical microphone, "Harry Potter has bested the mental challenges of the sphinx."

The majority of the crowd let out a cheer at the news as Remus was slowly picking his way towards Dumbledore to tell him of the Bagman polyjuice treachery. He spotted Arthur Weasley, and interestingly enough he was in deep discussion with his girlfriend about something important. Arthur nudged Tonks' shoulder and she glanced over to Remus and gave him a radiant smile before she turned back to Arthur to continue their discussion.

Remus finally reached the staff portion of the stands and he caught Dumbledore's eye with some very frantic waving. The old wizard quickly reached the former professor and gravely asked, "What appears to be the issue Remus?"

Remus took a deep breath before he replied, "Bagman was polyjuiced Albus. I put a tracking charm on whoever it was before whoever it was apparated away. The face was familiar but I couldn't give you a name."

Dumbledore frowned, "May I take a look Remus?"

With a nod he felt Dumbledore ease into his mind, gently probing until Remus allowed him access to the memory. After a long moment of reliving it he eased out and both men returned to their conscious minds, "That was Liam Avery in your memory my friend. This is a very serious complication to the proceedings tonight; in fact I carefully selected the individuals to do the necessary work on the maze. But, I admit that I am at a loss as to what Avery may have done. We must remain vigilant; I fear this night is far from over. Monitor your tracking charm until Avery ceases his movement, if nothing else we might glean the area Riddle's lies in wait."

With this Remus nodded and he slowly returned to Ron and Hermione, who appeared very engrossed as Crouch announced, "At the moment Harry Potter has made the most progress in the maze, he is followed closely by Cedric Diggory and Viktor Krum."

Remus sighed heavily as he finally managed to get Hermione's attention, "What did I miss?"

Hermione slowly relaxed her hands, her nails having drawn bits of blood as she replied, "He managed to figure out the boggart quickly and then he faced a sphinx. Oh, from Crouch's description he was brilliant Remus."

Ron grinned, "I'm sure you've been rubbing off on him."

Hermione huffed and swatted Ron's arm before she turned back to Remus, "He really was brilliant though."

Remus grinned, "I'm sure he was Hermione." His expression turned anxious, "I'm afraid I have no good news on my end to report. The man was a suspected deatheater that got off like Lucius Malfoy with claims of the imperius curse. I told your headmaster and he suggested we remain vigilant." Hermione and Ron shared a concerned look as Snuffles whined his understanding.

In Little Hangleton, Liam Avery arrived with a swirl of color and landed flawlessly in the midst of a large familial cemetery. He spotted Pettigrew and unlike most of his colleagues didn't even bother to waste the energy to taunt the cowardly wizard. In almost a tired tone he asked, "Wormtail, what of the preparations for the ritual?"

Wormtail looked up from the cauldron, "It's fully prepared now Liam. Once Harry arrives the real fun will begin."

Avery sneered, "I only called the brat Harry because that is what that buffoon Bagman would have. What exactly is your excuse?"

Wormtail retreated back into himself and replied, "I wasn't aware that I had called the brat by his first name. It must have been a slip of tongue." Avery decided to let the matter drop, after all if the dark lord's plans went to form the Potter brat's first name would be the least of their concerns.

Remus nodded absently as he sent the final stop of Avery in a messenger spell to Albus on the other side of the stadium. The quaffle was in Dumbledore's possession now.

It had only been a matter of five minutes since he had cleared the obstacle of the sphinx, but his gait had slowed to a walk as his scar tingled in a new and different way. It wasn't painful but it definitely was disconcerting to have no real idea what was causing the feeling.

Harry rounded a bend and as a clearing came into focus a burning viscous fluid of some sort landing near his feet. His eyes tracked the fluid back to its source with all of the cunning and skill for the hunt that his animagus form had. As he spotted the large beast only one thing came to mind, *Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts!*

With a flash of inspiration Harry raised his wand and uttered, "*Fumos Maxima.*" Large billowing stacks of smoke poured from Harry's wand until nothing could be seen in the smoke. With a smirk dancing on his lips Harry transformed, the odds immediately evening as one imposing magical creature began to battle another.

While the smoke made shadow travel a questionable exercise at best, Harry had the advantage of his enhanced feline vision to go with a muffled but still very capable sense of smell. Harry stalked the now confused and frantic beast, as it sporadically lashed out into the smoke. With some engrained instinctual knowledge in his partially beast-like mind simply screamed at Harry to attack the underbelly of the beast.

Harry continued to stalk around the flailing beast for a long moment, occasionally releasing a threatening hiss that would make the beast even more hysterical. After all the Skrewt wasn't a predator, it was a violent defensive creature, but even it somehow knew that the hisses from the smoke might very well mean its ultimate death.

Finally sensing an opening Harry stalked under the Skrewts and with one slash of his claws opened up some small wounds on the Skrewt's underbelly. Harry didn't particularly want to kill the beast, and thanks to his readings he still retained that the true killing power from his form came with a powerful bite, something that was ultimately self defeating against the heavily armored creature.

However the wounds were enough to signal a full retreat in the opposite direction of the predator as the Skrewt tore over hedges in a haphazard pattern to find some source of safety. Harry transformed back with a deeply exhaled breath, it had been a few weeks since he had managed the time and privacy to transform and this was also the first time he had felt the true empowerment that his form bestowed.

With a quick wind spell the smoke slowly began to dissipate and diffuse leaving a viewable clearing. With a sheepish grin Harry could spot the rampaging skrewt of on a tangent before he saw several wizards on brooms circle the beast and begin the slow process of bringing it under control. With that thought Harry begin the gradual process of reaching the tri-wizard cup once again. The scar's tingle forgotten in the surge of adrenalin that was still rushing through Harry's veins, exhilarated from the use of his form.

The crowd had roared as Cedric was announced to have defeated the mystery of the confundus mist, a very rare and difficult to reproduce spell donated from the repertoire of Professor Flitwick. The news of Krum's progress had been halting in comparison, as if the Bulgarian had somehow managed to avoid all of the challenges in his path to the cup.

Suddenly Crouch's voice sounded over the murmurs of the crowd, "Harry Potter has used a smoke spell to defeat the Blast-Ended Skrewt. Unfortunately he has also sent the beast into a rage and it is

rampaging across the maze as we speak. No need to fear folks ministry employees are up to the task as we speak.”

Hermione and Ron shared a bewildered look; the Blast-Ended Skrewts were those abhorrent beasts that Hagrid had been breeding back when he was still teaching care of magical creatures. If they didn't give someone in the class a burn of some sort during the class it was a puncture wound that Madam Pomfrey would treat. Of course her muttered threats under her breath had managed to lift the spirits of many a student, after all who didn't love to hear authority figures curse.

Ron finally managed to ask aloud, “How in the bloody hell did Harry beat one of those things with a smoke spell?”

Hermione of course had her suspicions as to why Harry had used the smoke spell, and all of them involved a tidy little secret that she along with said wizard were the only ones to know. Remus also appeared rather interested in the answer to Ron's question and Hermione managed to improvise a possible answer, “I would have to guess he used the sword Ronald. After all he did use it to rather spectacular effect last time unless you've forgotten.” Ron managed a sheepish grin as Remus nodded thoughtfully, the secret still in place for the time being.

Albus Dumbledore had already sent Mad-Eye Moody on a reconnaissance mission to record as many details of the area of Little Hangleton as was possible before returning to give a report. The name stuck in his mind as being familiar for some important reason, but his pensieve was safely stored away in the castle and his duties as headmaster of the school precluded any kind of a trip back to the castle.

With the equivalent of a mental sigh, Dumbledore continued to ponder the next step in the preparations for the inevitable conflict. With a glance to his left Minerva was clutching almost compulsively at the program she had gathered that had a brief description. Deciding it was pointless to worry during such a grand event he resolutely gazed down onto the Quidditch pitch awaiting word of Harry and Cedric's respective progress.

Harry frowned as he absently wiped his brow of the sweat that had begun to collect as he continued his seemingly endless trek to the triwizard cup. Harry began to idly wonder if they indeed wanted anyone to win the blasted cup. He had been going for over an hour and faced more challenges than he ever would have suspected. Unfortunately it wasn't the challenges taking a toll; instead it was the endless jogging and running he had been doing between the challenges. Harry knew without a doubt he would be too exhausted following the task to do anything of worth. A nice snuggle on the common room couch was definitely in order.

After reaching another fork in the path Harry reproduced the *point me* spell and his wand immediately moved a fraction to the right and with an audible sigh Harry saw the light at the end of the figurative tunnel. Slowing his pace back down to a jog he entered into a clearing seemingly devoid of anything. A spat of movement off to the left caught Harry's attention and with a full look Harry could see what appeared to be two wizards in the midst of a physical struggle of sorts. Suddenly they separated and a sickly yellow beam impacted one of the wizards. A moment later a scream broke Harry from his rare state in inactivity and he began to sprint. The wizard on the ground spotted Harry and yelled through his screams, "Harry help!"

Harry leveled his wand and an overcharged *expelliarmus* flew the remaining distance, its aim true as the wizard Harry now recognized as Krum went flying across into the hedge. Just as Harry was about to close the remaining distance and help Cedric the hedge of the maze closed up in a startling flurry of activity. A moment later two separate showers of red sparks littered the skies above the maze, Cedric Diggory and Viktor Krum had been eliminated.

As over half of the crowd groaned as Crouch announced, "Mr. Diggory and Mr. Krum have sent up sparks indicating their inability to advance any further in the maze. The last remaining contestant is Mr. Potter. One challenge remains for our youngest champion, will he pass with flying colors as he has with the rest or will this task prove his undoing?" It was a question no one had an answer to, but a certain bushy haired witch looked surprisingly confident for the first time the entire night.

Harry approached the corridor warily and finally the faint blue glow of what he could only assume was the tri-wizard cup could be seen. Perhaps it was simply a sign that he still had some growing to do, but he mindlessly lowered his wand and began to sprint towards the cup relief in his tired gait shining clearly, that is if anyone had been around to actually see it.

Then a menacing shadow loomed over him from behind, and in almost a comically stupid move Harry stopped running and slowly turned, just like the stupid people that are first to do in a horror movie. There standing behind Harry was an Acromantula easily the equal of Aragog in its size, and it appeared to lack all of the moral compunction the friend of Hagrid's had. The beast raised up on four of its hind legs before he dropped back down with its front legs hitting Harry with so much damnable force that he was certain a couple of ribs had been cracked at the very least.

Climbing up slowly, the Acromantula seemingly watched Harry in puzzlement and surprise that the young wizard had managed to even get up from its first attack, and it stood stock still as Harry raised his wand and weakly incanted, "*perfringo*." A blazing green blue streak surged from Harry's wand and managed to hit the spider on its underbelly due to the massive size difference between the two.

What happened next however was so obscenely ridiculous that Harry nearly fainted from surprise. Harry was well aware that the exploding hex was very powerful and potentially lethal when used against an average sized witch or wizard. However, on a beast as large as this specific Acromantula it probably wouldn't do more then aggravate the beast. Therefore, it came as a huge surprise when Harry's spell sent the eight legged monster flying twenty feet in the air before it landed on its back over two hundred meters away. The spider managed to retake its footing trembling with exertion before it wisely turned face and scampered away, much as the Skrewt had earlier.

Harry winced as he released a deep breath from relief before he gingerly turned and began to make his way towards the tri-wizard cup. His wand trained on any potential obstacles before he finally cleared the corner and the cup sat on a pedestal begging to be taken and celebrated over.

In the stands the crowd was building with a nervous excitement as Crouch announced, "Mr. Potter has encountered an Acromantula and we are capturing footage due to recording charms placed near the tri-wizard cup. Oh dear that had to hurt, Harry Potter has just been staggered by a tremendous blow from the Acromantula, a king Acromantula by all appearances. Oh, in a show of great resolve Mr. Potter has regained his footing and unleashes a spell...."

Throughout Britain witches and wizards strained for Barty Crouch Sr.'s next words, "Sweet merciful Merlin he blasted the Acromantula out of our charms viewing range. What a show of magic."

Harry relaxed as he leaned against the pedestal, by the grace of god, Merlin, or whoever was watching out for him he had survived and somehow won the tri-wizard tournament. As he touched the cup he felt a tugging sensation before he was whisked away.

Crouch watched the events unfold as he sputtered, "Harry Potter has taken the cup and....oh my, oh my the the tri-wizard cup was a portkey!"

Simultaneously two witches, one of brown bushy hair at Hogwarts and one of smooth red hair in Ottery St. Catchpole fainted dead away. After a moment an eerie silence descended over anyone involved in observing the third task, what in the name of Merlin had just happened?

A/N: There it was the new version of the third task. I hope I slaked the thirst of the action junkies in the crowd and sufficiently made the third task the mother of all tasks. Drop me a line in a review if you liked my version of events.

Well of course we all know what happened at the end of the chapter, but few others do. Next chapter, we have the long awaited scene in the graveyard as Riddle and Potter showdown. Of course, this time Harry is a bit more prepared and armed for such a conflict....we shall see what happens.

The question of the chapter this time centers around several startling parallels between two characters in canon pointed out to me in reviews last chapter. Ron and Wormtail have shared

many of the same characteristics, and for what it's worth Scabbers first owner has turned out to be quite the rat (Percy).

Will Ron take the same path in book 7? I'll be glad to reply to any detailed and supported arguments. Trust me there is plenty of material, and probably some I haven't even found myself.

Thanks to everyone that has reviewed thus far, and thanks for reading.

Chapter 19

As Harry released the tri-wizard cup portkey, he knew that he was going into an unknown situation and needed any advantage he could get. With a flash of inspiration, Harry quickly disillusioned Gryffindor's sword and scabbard with a flick of his wand, and kicked his feet to slow his decent and prepare for his landing.

As he touched down in the midst of a large graveyard he brandished his wand and immediately rolled out of the path of a red bolt meant for him. The movement quickly reminded Harry of his previous brush with the Acromantula a few moments earlier as pain shot through his body. The pain quickly disappeared and was replaced by blinding rage as the blood in his veins boiled, when he recognized one of the men as Wormtail and he screamed, "I won't give you mercy this time Peter."

The answer was another red bolt as Harry dodged the spell again with ease. A moment later another wizard, this one with black hair, joined Wormtail as they traded spells with Harry.

Harry waved his wand and sent out a wide beamed stunner as both men managed to evade the spell and returned with spells of their own. The fighting slowly trailed away from the landing site and back towards some older graves based upon the decrepit marble of the headstones.

Harry dove behind a one particularly old tombstone before it crumbled from a spell blast and he rolled away unleashing a flurry of *reducto* on the two wizards. Harry managed to graze the black haired wizard sending the man to the ground as a *reducto* from Pettigrew hit the ground directly in front of the teenage wizard sending him tumbling several feet backward as he landed with a painful thump.

If his ribs and chest had ached before, the feeling now was several times worse as he fitfully tried to catch his breath. As Pettigrew approached him he tried to do a silent stunner, and was rather pleased as a red bolt snapped out from his unmoving wand and impacted the former marauder directly between the eyes.

With a tiny smirk he climbed to his feet as he thought, *I am so glad I worked on some silent spell casting with Moody*. Slowly and gingerly climbing walking to his quarry, Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he gazed down at the prone form of Wormtail. With a flash of inspiration Harry thought, "*Accio Tri-wizard cup*." As he reached out to grab the cup and return to Hogwarts, a large serpentine tail lashed him in the back and the cup painfully gashed his forehead before it dropped onto the unconscious form of Wormtail and vanished.

Harry mentally cursed whatever hit him as he rolled over, and then looked directly into the eyes of an enormous snake that he instantly knew was Nagini. As the beast lunged and sunk its fangs into his left leg, the pain Harry felt was enough to finally claim his consciousness as the darkness took hold.

At Hogwarts the crowds had finally been settled enough for ministry aurors to begin escorting them to the edge of the wards, Hermione had been awakened and the Potter group had been led down to the field. Cedric had a blanket wrapped around his shoulders and he would tremble violently every few moments from the lingering effects of a briefly held cruciatus curse. Spotting Hermione he managed to stutter out, "T-tell Harry thanks for saving me in there."

Hermione managed a small reassuring smile, "I will Cedric, but for now you need to take care of yourself." Cedric managed to nod slightly as another tremor shot a spasm through his body.

Krum looked dazed, and Fleur had a bandage wrapped around her head as Madam Pomfrey was running diagnostic spells. As the group passed they all heard Madam Pomfrey mutter, "Placed under the imperius curse. Blunt force trauma, resulting in a concussion. Cruciatus exposure and Merlin knows how bad Potter will be. I knew this tournament was a terrible idea. But, nobody listens to the person who actually has to deal with the injured."

Hermione frowned as her lip trembled before her mother wrapped a reassuring arm around her, and they continued towards Dumbledore who was now talking to Moody animatedly. As they approached Moody grumbled, "I'm telling you Albus, the wards surrounding that tracking charm are so thick and powerful you'd need a team of

Gringott's best curse breakers to take them down. Even then it would take a few hours."

Dumbledore felt the approaching presence of Harry's support system as he turned to them and spoke, "We are currently doing everything in our power to bring Harry back safely. I assume that if Harry can get his hands back on the tri-wizard cup he will be able to reactivate the portkey and come back to the castle."

Dumbledore closed his eyes as a brief white nimbus swirled around his head before he sighed and opened his eyes. Remus frowned and asked, "What was that Albus?"

Dumbledore removed his glasses, buffing them against his robe before placing them back on his nose and he replied, "I've directed any portkeys entering the wards to arrive about ten feet in front of us."

Hermione, forgetting about Harry's plight for a brief moment stated, "It didn't mention anything about headmasters being able to adjust the wards like that in Hogwarts a History."

Dumbledore managed a quick grin, "While it is a very informative tome, I am afraid certain things must remain secret to ensure the security of the castle." Hermione nodded before her face became pensive again, waiting anxiously for Harry to return.

It had been another ten minutes of tense whispering when a flash in the sky alerted everyone to an incoming portkey. Every available wand was trained as a still form landed on the ground next to the cup, and it wasn't even Harry Potter.

Remus growled, "It's Pettigrew; someone get him under wraps, and remember he's a rat animagus."

Moody grinned as he turned to Dumbledore, "When you told me that Black was innocent Albus I admit I was skeptical, but now seeing this I'd be happy to set up a nice cozy spot in the ministry and have Pettigrew questioned before Fudge can mess it up."

Dumbledore nodded, "See that you get an official interview with Verisateum done Alastor, and talk to Amelia Bones about drawing up

the proper paperwork.” Reaching into his robes he pulled a string from his pocket before he muttered, “Portus” and watched as the string let off a blue glow for a moment before returning to its normal state.

In a measured tone Dumbledore said, “This will take you to the ministry atrium Alastor. Work quickly, Cornelius is somewhere in the castle as we speak.”

Hermione asked in a strangled voice, “Headmaster, if the portkey has returned without Harry how are we going to find him?”

Dumbledore sighed heavily, “The portus charm generally only works for a trip to a destination and back. I will task Fawkes to find Harry, and hopefully it will be in time.”

A moment later the phoenix appeared and Dumbledore murmured, “Fawkes you must find Harry, you should be able to locate him by the feather in his wand.” Fawkes trilled his understanding and a moment later vanished in a flash of fire.

Ron had been quiet up to this point, just trying to take everything in before he asked, “Harry’s core is one of Fawkes’ feathers?” Dumbledore merely nodded, he had been alive for around one hundred and fifty years and the coming minutes were to be some of the most anxious of his life.

In the graveyard connected to Riddle Manor things were starting to take a very sour turn. After Harry had finally succumbed from Nagini’s bite, Avery had managed to stem the bleeding from his own wounds enough to get started on the task at hand, the ritual to completely restore the dark lord.

He bound Harry to the tombstone of Tom Riddle Sr., and finished the preparations for the ritual potion before he finally entered the Mausoleum his master had been resting in. Voldemort hissed at Avery, “What has happened to Wormtail?”

Avery sighed, “Potter managed to best him in a duel and the idiot was portkeyed back to Hogwarts.”

Voldemort's face was contorted into a fierce scowl before he spoke, "Very well, his usefulness was coming to an end anyways. You will take his place in the ritual and then will take the position your father once held in my inner circle."

Avery nodded as he gathered his master into the bundle he had been wrapped in before walking back out of the mausoleum and towards the cauldron about fifteen feet away from Harry.

Sitting his master gently into the cauldron he took two long bones by the side and began the ritual, "Bone of the father unknowingly given, you will renew your son." Dropping the two bones into the cauldron a flare of magic was released as the cauldron began to bubble more frequently.

The next part was what Liam Avery had least looked forward to since being informed that he was taking Pettigrew's place. He grabbed the ritual dagger and slowly slid the magically sharpened dagger around his hand cutting it off just above the wrist. The hand dropped into the cauldron and an even more powerful flare of magic dissipated in the surrounding area.

With this flare Harry's eyes slowly blinked open as he took a very brief inventory of his situation. He was bound to something large and elevated less than ten feet above the ground. His ribs and chest still ached and his left leg was throbbing painfully, and now that black haired wizard was walking at him with a very nasty looking dagger in his one good hand.

The man managed a pained smile, "Ah welcome to our little party Mr. Potter. Well actually, you might not be enjoying your night as much as the rest of us. But, you can't please everyone now can you?"

Harry just looked into the man's eyes and with a start he realized that whoever this man was, he was completely mad. The man took Harry's left arm and the blade dug into his flesh as a jagged V was carved into his arm. Capturing a fair amount of the blood on the blood the man walked back to the cauldron before he incanted, "Blood of the enemy forcibly taken you will revive your foe."

The blood dripped into the cauldron and a huge flare that knocked the unknown man off of his feet rippled around the surrounding areas before it faded and a figure began to rise from the cauldron. Based solely by the throbbing pain in his scar, Harry had a fair guess as to who it was.

But, all of his suspicions were confirmed as the man stepped into a robe held by the black haired man before he also took a wand from the ground by the cauldron. The man was pale, bald, tall, and his body was of the sort that appeared suited to powerful movement. Turning to look at Harry the burning red eyes of Lord Voldemort greeted the teenage wizard as he hissed, "Ah Potter, it appears you have been damaged some. Let me fix that so that you can die only from my malice."

With a couple of almost careless flicks of his wand Harry's breathing became almost normal again, his leg wound was sealed and healed without a noticeable scar, and he was dropped the five feet to the ground. After a moment Harry's wand was tossed at his feet and he picked it up.

Voldemort walked over to Avery and with a graceful wave of his wand a silver hand replaces the flesh and bone of a few minutes earlier. With a glance over at Harry, Voldemort casually spoke, "From what I've been told congratulations are in order Harry. Tri-wizard champion at your age is quite the impressive feat of magic." Turning his full attention to Harry he continued, "I see tonight ending one of two ways for you Harry. One, you accept my offer to join the ranks of my death eaters as my apprentice where your greatness can be cultivated. Or the other option is you refuse me and I kill you in front of an audience of my followers before I send your body back to Hogwarts in pieces. So what's your preference?"

Harry looked straight into Voldemort's eyes and with a look of pure defiance he replied, "I would rather die fighting on my feet than live on my knees like the rest of your followers." With a wicked smirk he asked, "Tell me Tom, are Pettigrew and Crouch really the best you have, because if they are I think you need to beef up the recruiting program."

Instead of answering in anger Voldemort merely smirked, "So be it Potter, your death will mark the return of Lord Voldemort." With a wave Avery walked over and Voldemort pressed his wand to the man's left forearm where the dark mark appeared in all of its evil glory. With a nod he said, "Well Potter I believe the best way to spend our time together until my followers arrive is to test out my wand." Harry arched an eyebrow before the dark wizard screamed, "*Crucio*" of course despite the fact that Harry was mostly healed from the task and Nagini, he couldn't dive out of the path of the sickly yellow beam as it impacted him.

Harry's vision was like a flickering light bulb for a moment as his body tried to compensate for the extreme pain rippling throughout his body. Voldemort released the spell after a minute and chuckled with mirth as he lectured, "Have you ever wondered why unforgivable curses are deemed as such Harry?" Taking Harry's spasm as a no he continued, "It's true they are largely un-blockable and that intent to perform the spells properly requires a certain perverse pleasure from others suffering. But, more importantly the spells can corrupt the purest of souls. Magic truly is a remarkable thing you know."

Harry was still twitching, but it had lessened greatly as Voldemort continued, "I believe the filthy muggles would describe chocolate and sex as addictive quantities. The exhilarating rush one receives from a properly performed unforgivable eclipses all of those by leaps and bounds. So, you can plainly see why the ministry discourages the practice with a stay in their lovely little hotel on the sea. It wouldn't do for addicted witches and wizards to go about killing anyone they can find simply for what I believe would be called a fix."

Harry braced himself on his arms that were still quivering as he slowly climbed to his feet, an occasional facial twitch or spasm in his muscles still plainly visible. As a funnel formed in the sky Harry replied, "I reckon I'll stick with chocolate, and when I get to having sex I'll think I'll draw the line there. You can keep your pain jollies for yourself."

Voldemort quirked an amused eyebrow, the only visible hair on his body, as he turned his back on Harry and watched as nine cloaked individuals appeared. Each of the men immediately bowed around

Voldemort and he hissed, "Why is it that so many of my inner circle are free and yet could not make the effort to seek me out so that I could return more quickly?"

Voldemort pulled a few of the death eaters' masks off as he gave furious looks at each of them waiting for one to crack. Harry vaguely looked at the few unmasked death eaters and couldn't place their faces even though a few of them looked familiar.

When none answered Voldemort continued, "My most faithful rot in Azkaban and I am left with a pack of fools who are too cowardly to answer when spoken to. Penance will be made, but for now join me as I kill the foolish boy credited with my defeat."

All of the other men removed their masks and Harry blankly only recognized one of them, Lucius Malfoy, not a surprise for Harry all things considered.

At Hogwarts Severus Snape downed another pain relieving potion as his mark burned horribly, he would need to begin research into finding a means of cutting the link between the mark and his pain receptors. If he were to be of any use in the war ahead, this much at least would need to be accomplished.

Walking into the hospital ward he spotted Madam Pomfrey, who was fussing over the three present champions before he called out, "Poppy."

Madam Pomfrey gave the three a stern look before she bustled over to Snape and asked impatiently, "What is it Severus?"

Snape sighed, "If Potter is dealing with the unsavory sort that we all expect he is; I assume you would like some cruciatus restorative potion, and perhaps some nerve dampening draught as well for any lengthy exposure to the curse."

Madam Pomfrey paled before she nodded and replied, "Yes that would be best Severus. Thank you for the offer."

Snape nodded as he turned on his heel and marched out of the hospital wing with his cloak billowing behind. He had a task to

complete and for once he idly hoped that Potter's stretch of luck would continue or the war would be over before it even started.

At the ministry of magic Moody had already gotten a full confession out of Peter Pettigrew and officially reopened the file of Sirius Black. A hearing was scheduled with Madam Bones' help although the talk throughout the entire building was the disappearance of the boy-who-lived.

Moody stumped over to the Ministry's FLOO connections and called Hogwarts, "Minerva, this is Moody. Tell Albus that I did as was requested. The paperwork for the puppy has been filled out and approved."

Professor McGonagall's stern face appeared in the fireplace as she replied, "I've sent a messenger spell informing him. Was there anything else?"

Moody grunted, "Has Potter made it back yet?"

Minerva frowned, "No, and at last check Albus informed me that Fawkes is having difficulties reaching him. I only pray that it isn't too late."

Moody nodded, "Aye lass, but have some faith in the boy he's something special."

Minerva managed a tiny smile, "That he is Alastor. Call back in about thirty minutes; hopefully we will have word by then."

Fawkes was having difficulties getting close to Harry because of the vast concentrations of dark magic near Harry's location. Dark magic served to weaken a phoenix's sense of orientation. It would take more time to reach the green eyed boy as his wizard had asked of him.

Voldemort started his little speech, Harry was certain the dark wizard had been practicing it for quite some time. "It all started on Halloween over 13 years ago. Even in all of my greatness I overlooked some ancient magic when I attacked the Potters. As all of you know I did try to recruit both of them to our side, but was ultimately rebuffed and

when other information became available the path was set. I killed James Potter, and while he fought well he is still quite dead.”

Voldemort smirked as Harry flinched at the mention of his father’s death, before he continued, “The mudblood could have saved herself, but she tried my patience and I killed her as well. Unfortunately, in the process I unlocked ancient sacrificial magic within our friend the boy-who-lived here. The spell I cast on the brat rebounded and I was reduced to a lowly spirit, forced to roam the world seeking magical sustenance when I could. Only the most faithful of my followers know the lengths to which I went guaranteeing my immortality.” If Harry had been doing more than frantically trying to find a way out of this hell, he would have noticed Lucius Malfoy pale at Voldemort’s mention.

Harry was slowly growing numb both emotionally and physically as Voldemort continued his rant about his greatness and the folly of his followers to ever believe him dead. After several cruciatus were handed out the evil wizard turned back to Harry and with a sneer and none of the earlier candor they had shared, “Now Potter, it is time I end your meddlesome life.”

Harry was having a difficult time grasping reality at this point; the nearly blinding aftereffects of the cruciatus were weighing down on his nervous system and emotionally he was rubbed as raw as he had ever been before. Here stood his parent’s murderer casually discussing the details of how he had killed them, and all Harry could do was stare.

Harry walked through the steps and bowed to begin the duel as was demanded of him by Voldemort. At this point arguing over such a minor thing seemed wasteful, and it was giving him time to hopefully reboot his brain and focus on the task at hand.

His body still felt sluggish as Voldemort almost lovingly cast, “*Crucio*” and Harry felt the ripples of agony taking over again. Unlike the first time he focused on something aside from the pain as he tried to think of a way to survive and fight another day. His thoughts grayed for a moment as the pain fought his focus before he focused once again and felt the curse being removed. Crawling to his feet more quickly this time he stood and returned with the same spell he had used to

success earlier, "*Perfringo*" and the spell lashed against Voldemort's hastily constructed shield, pushing the surprised dark lord back a few feet.

Voldemort turned to his death eaters, "The Potter boy has some talent. But, alas talent goes for naught if it isn't fully utilized. Such a pity that it goes to waste."

Voldemort waved his wand and incanted, "*Avada Kedavra*" and a familiar green bolt shot through the air towards Harry's chest.

Harry rolled out of the spell's path when he heard Voldemort begin the incantation and returned, "*Abrumpo*" as the blood red bolt was returned. The spells met in the middle, but instead of the usual spell backlash they connected before the magic was fed back the remaining feet into their wands. Harry was on one knee as he struggled with his wand, Voldemort had taken two hands to grip his wand, appearing quite perturbed with the turn of events.

The golden strands connecting the wands began to slowly spread upward as a golden cage of pure magic eventually enclosed the two combatants. Voldemort sneered, "What magic is this Potter?"

Harry slowly rose to his feet, "I imagine this has something to do with my wand being a brother wand to yours."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed, "While that is a very interesting fact to know, it only forestalls the inevitable Potter. You will die tonight, and then you may join your parents as you should have 13 years ago."

Harry was about to form a response when a most unusual thing happened, an ethereal form floated from Voldemort's wand. Harry immediately recognized the man as Frank Bryce and he turned to Harry and said, "Aye lad this one's an evil bastard. Old Frank will help ya when the time is right."

Voldemort looked slightly paler than even his pasty white complexion as Harry asked, "So Tom, have you ever heard of a muggle television show called 'this is your life'?"

Voldemort blinked in surprise until he felt the same tingle before Bryce had exited the wand. Next out of the wand was Bertha Jorkins. She turned to Harry and said, "You must hold on young man, your parents are coming." The spectral shadow joined Bryce as they circled Voldemort whispering inflammatory things on the dark lord's ear.

The beads of magic were pooling as the deatheaters would occasionally try to aid their master only to be repelled. Harry was slowly forcing the beads towards Voldemort, as the dark lord began to perspire as he tried to force the beads back at the teenager. With another tingle Lily Potter floated out of Tom Marvolo Riddle's wand. She immediately flew to Harry side, and like a pepper-up potion he felt revived as she frantically whispered, "Harry love, you need to hold on for your father. Once he arrives we can distract Voldemort as you break the connection. Fawkes is coming and he can get you to safety."

Harry's concentration slipped as the beads began to move back towards Harry. Voldemort cackled, "You see Potter, foolish emotions like love hold no sway in the face of power as great as mine."

Harry gritted his teeth and the beads stopped near the center before his eyes flicked to his mother and he asked, "Mum?"

Lily sadly replied, "No Harry, I am merely an echo of my former self. Your father and I have moved on to the next adventure as we should have."

Voldemort's arms began to tremble as the echo of James Potter exited the wand, and the beads of magic surged towards the dark wizard. He turned to Harry with messy hair, shorter than Harry's but clearly hard to manage. With tears in his voice he said, "Harry?"

Harry could only nod, his Occlumency becoming useless as his emotions were worn plainly on his sleeves as tears ran down his cheeks. James floated close and said, "Alright son, we don't have long before we dissipate. Just promise me one thing." Harry nodded, "Don't stop living your life because this bastard decided to attack you as a baby."

Harry thickly replied, "I promise dad." James nodded proudly as Lily wrapped an ethereal arm around Harry and gave him the closest thing to a hug she could. James and Lily locked gazes before they spoke in tandem, "You need to break the connection after we attack Riddle son. Remember, we'll always love you."

The four echoes joined and began to envelope Voldemort as Harry broke the connection with a quick downward slash of his wand. Fawkes flashed into existence next to Harry and grasped the stunned teen's shoulder. Voldemort fought through the echoes just in time to watch Harry vanish in a flash of fire. Enraged he turned to his death eaters and said, "Now, it is time you pay for your sins."

At Hogwarts Cornelius Fudge finally managed to work his way down to the Quidditch pitch following a very unpleasant dressing down from the Bulgarian and French Ministers of Magic for organizing and running such a poorly done tournament. Approaching the small group remaining he bellowed, "Dumbledore, what is the meaning of this. I demand to see Potter right now."

Dumbledore turned to Fudge and calmly replied, "I would like to see Harry for much purer reasons than whatever you propose Cornelius. His final fate is firmly out of our hands, but I have sent Fawkes to retrieve him hopefully in one piece."

Fudge scowled as he looked at the others before his eyes locked on Remus, "You werewolf, you had something to do with this didn't you?"

Michael Granger finally stepped into the conversation, "Now see here Minister, you surely can't blame any of us when it is someone from your ministry who placed this tri-wizard cup in its final place, can you?"

Fudge blustered, "I'd remind you that I am the minister of magic Mr.?"

Michael Granger replied, "Mr. Granger, Hermione is my daughter and Harry is her boyfriend."

Fudge furrowed his brow, "Ms. Granger is a muggleborn so that means you are a muggle?"

Michael nodded, "Yes sir that's correct."

With a dismissive wave of his hand Fudge said, "Whatever tenuous grasp you have on the situation tonight Mr. Granger, I assure you it is quite incorrect. There is no way that a muggle could grasp such things." Bianca was about to step in and defend her husband before Hermione placed a calming hand on her mother's shoulder, it wouldn't benefit anyone for her parents to be obliterated by a ministry auror.

Before another word could be spoken Fawkes and Harry arrived in a flash of fire. Based upon the first look Harry was still conscious, but had seen far better days. His eyes were haunted, his body was tensed in an attempt to diminish the pain from the multiple cruciatus, and the pain relief spell that Voldemort had cast on his ribs was beginning to fade as Harry protectively cradled his free arm around his chest.

Fudge made a move to speak to Harry but was stopped as Remus and the Grangers blocked his clear path to the distraught teen. Dumbledore took one look at Harry before he asked, "Harry?"

Harry blinked once before he vomited onto Dumbledore's robes. With a frown Dumbledore said, "Fawkes please take Harry to Madam Pomfrey at once." Fawkes trilled as the pair vanished once more, en route to the hospital wing.

Those remaining on the pitch took off at a near sprint, Fudge sending the aurors ahead in an attempt to block Dumbledore from Harry. Dumbledore was already quite confident that Madam Pomfrey could handle a pair of aurors. Hermione and her parents just wanted to know that Harry would be fine. Ron really only had one directive, get to Harry first. Remus and Snuffles led the way as they needed to comfort Harry, the tri-wizard champion, in any way they could.

Little did any of them know that what awaited them in the hospital wing was nothing they ever would have expected.

A/N: There it is my graveyard scene. Take notice that Voldemort wasn't so dismissive of Harry this time. Also, remember all of

the little things that were mentioned. Most of them will have relevance in the coming years.

Next chapter we have the night in the hospital wing, the fall out elsewhere in the wizarding world, the ministry's response, and ultimately Harry's response. Dumbledore already promised to tell Harry the prophecy, so remember that will come before they leave the school. Figure they will be leaving for summer break in about a week. As they exit the train this story will end, and the sequel will begin.

Open Your Eyes: The Order of the Phoenix

Now, for the question of the chapter I have a canon specific question.

What factors do you think allowed the ministry to so effectively deny Voldemort's return for an entire year?

Is it because Dumbledore wasn't forceful enough? Is it because the ministry had the media in their pocket? Or is it another reason completely unrelated?

Thanks to all of you that have read and reviewed. I hope you all enjoyed the graveyard scene, and the quick glimpses elsewhere. Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 20

The sprint to the castle and ensuing sprint to the hospital wing was largely a tie between Ron, Snuffles, and Remus. The school was on complete lock down as the various heads of house were soothing the frazzled nerves of the students. Therefore it came as quite the surprise when the first three entered the hospital wing to see Dumbledore conversing with Madam Pomfrey as she forced a potion down Harry's throat.

Harry looked much better, as a bit of color was returning to his cheeks, and while he was trembling it wasn't as noticeable as before. Remus and Snuffles approached the bed with Ron and they were about to ask Harry how he was when Madam Pomfrey noticed their presence and shooed them away as she said, "Mr. Potter is not up for talking yet gentlemen. He only looks fine because of some fortuitous potions made by Severus. I assure you for the next thirty minutes he will be in a state very close to catatonia as the potions go to work on his nerves."

Remus frowned, "What's wrong with his nerves?"

Madam Pomfrey frowned, "He was placed under multiple cruciatus curses. The other damage isn't as serious but Mr. Potter will have complications from the cruciatus for the next couple of weeks. Fortunately his exposure was not so great as to do permanent damage."

Remus and Ron sighed in relief, and Snuffles managed to whine his relief before the two aurors entered the wing looking winded. The first one to catch his breath said, "I'm auror Dawlish and I am afraid that Minister Fudge requests Mr. Potter's audience."

Madam Pomfrey bustled over and succinctly replied, "Mr. Potter is incapable of any kind of conversation for thirty minutes at the bare minimum. He should be completely cognizant of his surroundings in an hour and I will allow your audience with Minister Fudge then, but not a moment earlier."

The aurors wanted to protest but one last scathing look from Madam Pomfrey quelled their protests and turned them into whimpers. Hermione and her parents came running into the hospital wing a moment later and she took up residence on the chair next to Harry's bed. The Grangers turned to Remus and he replied, "It appears that Harry was tortured for a time after he disappeared with the cup. We won't know exactly what happened for about an hour, so we simply have to wait." Bianca and Michael frowned but nodded as they glanced over at their daughter. Hermione was softly stroking Harry's hand.

It appeared that things were finally going to settle as silence reigned for a few moments before a blustering and winded Cornelius Fudge shakily waddled into the hospital wing. After a moment to compose himself and lower the color of his flesh from purple to light red he loudly proclaimed, "Albus, I demand to see Potter. This was a ministry sanctioned event, and it is my right to question him."

Dumbledore slowly walked over to the blustering politician and quietly replied, "Cornelius calm yourself, Harry is currently indisposed as he undergoes some treatment for multiple exposures to the cruciatus curse."

Fudge paled, "B-but why would anyone torture the boy-who-lived?"

Dumbledore frowned, "I can not confirm anything without speaking to Harry, but I have reason to believe that Voldemort has returned. In fact, if you join me over at Harry's bedside here I will show you why."

Fudge nodded dumbly as he followed Dumbledore over to the bed before he sat down heavily at the sight of the gruesomely carved **V** on Harry's left arm. After a moment to gather himself, a crazy almost manic look crossed Fudge's face and he said, "This doesn't prove anything Dumbledore. Without tangible proof I am afraid I can not do anything in response."

Dumbledore nodded and said, "Peter Pettigrew has already been taken into custody thanks to Harry's actions tonight. As I am aware he has already been questioned and his testimony indicates he was in the midst of a ritual to return Voldemort to a body. Without having

the testimony in front of me I can only speculate that Harry's blood was needed in a ritual; Hence the gash in Harry's forearm."

Fudge's jaw snapped shut firmly and the room settled into a strange silence. The silence was only interrupted by the quiet conversation between Dumbledore, Remus, and the Grangers at the far end of the wing away from prying ears.

Remus softly said, "I know that all of this may seem to be rather jarring, but if you have any questions Albus and I will gladly answer."

Michael sighed, "Hermione has made vague mentions of this dark wizard, Voldemort, is it?" Remus and Dumbledore nodded as he continued, "This Voldemort is after Harry?"

Dumbledore simply replied, "I am surprised that your daughter hasn't told you the full story of Harry's life before, but perhaps it is a reaction that shows how she truly views Harry." All of those present quirked an eyebrow and Dumbledore clarified, "She does not view Harry as the boy-who-lived. She views him as Harry Potter a boy who she cares deeply for." The adult Grangers shared a knowing smile and Dumbledore continued, "Harry's parents were murdered by Voldemort when he was 15 months old. Voldemort attempted to kill Harry as well, but the killing curse rebounded back on to Voldemort casting him from his body but not destroying him completely."

Bianca's eyes were wide as she asked, "Now you suspect that this Voldemort has regained his body after taking some of Harry's blood."

Dumbledore corrected, "He regained form Madam, his original body was quite destroyed on the fateful night of his first banishment."

Remus let out a heavy breath before he said, "Rest assured Harry and Hermione will be given the best guards possible this summer. In fact, if you are willing we have arranged training for both of them at a friend's house. In fact, with any luck my friend, who is Harry's godfather, will be able to formally accept guardianship of Harry; thus giving him a caring place to live during the summers."

Dumbledore once again softly corrected, "Remus, Harry will still need to stay a week at the Dursleys. But, I believe that we can arrange for some canine companionship to ensure Harry's treatment."

Remus grinned before Michael broke in, "Those relatives of Harry's are quite ghastly people I must say. I scarcely believed it when I talked on the phone with Harry's uncle and the man had to restrain himself from calling his nephew a freak."

Dumbledore winced and admitted, "I agree that the Dursleys are not very pleasant people. But, I hope that the one week Harry must stay with them every summer until his age of majority will be as pleasant of an experience as possible."

Michael and Bianca shared a look before she said, "Harry will be welcome in our house whenever he wants. He is a very nice young man, despite his upbringing."

Remus smiled and replied, "His parents would be very proud to know that. I think that everyone who knew James and Lily were the only ones not celebrating like idiots when Voldemort was vanquished the first time."

Michael nodded and then he asked, "How does this Voldemort operate?"

Dumbledore answered, "I believe the muggle equivalent would be a terrorist perhaps in the form of the Irish Republic Army."

Michael frowned, "That's not exactly a fair comparison based upon everything you've stated. The IRA seeks freedom even if it is a bad way of seeking it. This Voldemort only seeks power, am I correct?"

Remus furrowed his brow, "He is a terrorist Mr. Granger, but yes he only seeks power through his actions."

Dumbledore twinkled slightly, "At any rate, if Voldemort is back, in the past he often operated between cycles of activity and inactivity so we should expect more of the same. He will attack specific targets; typically those are the greatest threat to him and his legions. In fact, James and Lily escaped Voldemort thrice before they finally

succumbed. He is persistent if nothing else, Harry and your daughter can attest to as much.”

Glancing across the room at Fudge, Dumbledore noticed that the man was beyond his initial stages of shock and denial and had moved on to measuring the strengths and weaknesses of his own position. Reaching a hand into his robe he pulled an old watch out and with a glance realized that Harry would be ready to talk in about ten minutes. Once Harry was completely aware of his surroundings then things would indeed get very interesting.

At the ministry of magic, news of Harry Potter’s reasonably safe return had already begun to permeate from department to department. Due to the relative issues during the tri-wizard tournament the various department heads were having a meeting to discuss the state of the ministry.

Amelia Bones led the most influential department and with Barty Crouch Sr. she had amongst the most seniority of anyone in the ministry. Glancing around she quickly dealt with the topic that most were already discussing, “Peter Pettigrew was indeed captured tonight and has been questioned. Revelations from the questioning include the exoneration of Sirius Black. I have already contacted my peers in muggle law enforcement and ordered the cessation to the manhunt for the man. Additionally, Pettigrew alluded that he was to undergo a part in a ritual to restore Voldemort to his body.”

Bones sighed heavily as the majority of those present flinched at Voldemort’s name before Barty Crouch Sr. stood, “I now am willing to accept my responsibility in refusing Black a trial, whatever that may be.”

Bones glanced around and saw that the rest of the department heads were of a split opinion so she made a political decision, “That won’t be necessary Barty. I think that everyone here can agree that we don’t want Fudge taking any more power in the ministry by appointing a puppet in your position.”

Arthur Weasley stood and said, “I quite agree Amelia, but we have to discuss what you-know-who’s return might mean for the ministry.”

Bones nodded, "Well, I think all of us present can remember what it was like during Voldemort's first reign. We made mistakes collectively, but I can think of a few things we could institute soon that would help: Mandatory checks for the dark mark, random testing for the imperius and Verisateum questioning. Fudge will fight this because of his anonymous benefactors won't want such a change, but if we provide a united front it will pass. We will need to restore the auror squad to numbers comparative to the end of Voldemort's first reign, and for that we will need Fudge's complete approval."

Amos Diggory, still slightly shaken from visiting his trembling son a few moments earlier offered, "I'll send ministry delegations to the giants, registered werewolves, and the dementors to ensure their respective loyalty."

Bones looked around, happy with the progress of the meeting as she said, "I think that we'll know more tomorrow. If Voldemort has indeed returned, we will follow through on each of these contingencies. But, we can't risk another full meeting like this, because Fudge wouldn't look kindly to plotting behind his back. Everything else on informal channels from here until Fudge is out of office. Good night every one. Try to get some sleep the next several days I fear will require our very best."

Crouch Sr. was the last to leave the large board room as he mused in his thoughts, *Bones' attitude and initiative was surprising, she is an excellent administrator but had no political aspirations. If he could firmly align himself as her solid second he could complete his peaceful coup in far less time than working alone. All things considered tonight had gone as well as he could expect.*

Harry slowly felt the fog in his mind dissipate and he slowly began to take stock of his night, he had been helpless to stop Voldemort's return and his parents or an echo of his parents had helped save him. He knew he was in the hospital wing, and based upon the numbed pain he was still in, he figured the pair of *crucios* would have some lingering effects. As he blinked his eyes open he could only silently muse that considering he had faced Voldemort in the flesh for the first time, he was quite content to deal with a little pain in exchange for his own life.

Hermione immediately noticed that Harry's eyes were opening and she slid his glasses onto his face before she quietly asked, "How do you feel?"

Harry quietly replied, "As well as can be expected I guess. Did you catch Wormtail?"

Hermione smiled and nodded as the adults in the room finally took notice that Harry had rejoined those amongst the living. Snuffles jumped onto the bed and curled up at Harry's legs and the adults all walked over to the bed, Fudge standing next to Dumbledore as the old wizard asked, "Would you care to tell us what happened tonight Harry?"

Madam Pomfrey handed Harry a small glass of water and they all watched as trembling hands, aided by Hermione's gentle touch, tipped the glass back and the fluid quenched his parched throat. Harry quietly spoke, "I was transported to a graveyard somewhere. I noticed that it was where Riddle's father was buried."

Fudge frowned, "Riddle?"

Harry sighed, "Tom Marvolo Riddle better known as Lord Voldemort."

Fudge's eyes were wide as the name, struck a chord of some sort, but he quickly masked his expression as Harry continued, "I managed to stun Pettigrew and injure another dark haired wizard. I summoned the tri-wizard cup but Riddle's snake prevented me from taking it back to Hogwarts. It landed on Wormtail and he vanished just as the snake bit me on my leg. It was painful enough that I blacked out."

Dumbledore quickly clarified, "Yes Pettigrew has been dealt with Harry. With any luck, your dream from last year may come true for the coming summer."

Harry managed a small smile, well aware that Dumbledore wasn't in the clear to refer to the black dog on his bed as Sirius. Harry shuddered as a residual tremor shot down his nerves, and every adult present grimaced at the pained expression on his face. Hermione merely wrapped her arms around him and offered all of the comfort she could. After a moment he continued, "When I came to I

was tied to Riddle Sr.'s tombstone and the same black haired wizard I had injured earlier was walking towards me with a dagger of some kind. But, one of his hands was missing and a cauldron behind him was billowing smoke. Anyways, he cut this V in my arm and said something along the lines blood of the enemy forcibly taken you will revive your foe."

Dumbledore's eyes flashed with some jubilant emotion for a fleeting moment, which Harry noticed but didn't comment upon other than to nod at the old wizard and continue, "Then he put the blood from the cut in the cauldron and Voldemort climbed out with a new body. He was bald, and if I'd never seen his eyes before I would have been terrified by how much they glowed red." Harry shuddered once again as Hermione gently squeezed him to show that she wasn't going anywhere.

The Grangers had watched the entire thing with something akin to shock, this wasn't the same polite boy they had hosted during the summer; this was a powerful young man shaken but not destroyed by a night of sheer terror. Hermione's actions also sent a strong message to Michael and Bianca, their daughter would stand by Harry through it all and they could do nothing to change that.

Harry sighed as he continued, "He hit me with the cruciatus after he eased my pain and healed the snake bite wound on my leg. He held it for awhile before he summoned some of his other deatheaters using the dark mark."

Fudge began to hold his breath as Harry continued, the minister of magic knew he wasn't going to like what came next, "I really didn't recognize any of them..." A tremor shook Harry's body; Fudge misconstrued it as the end of his statement before Harry continued, "...aside from Lucius Malfoy."

The aurors shared a look at this before Fudge said, "Well he was obviously under the imperius curse, which would explain his presence."

Dawlish spoke up, "Minister Fudge sir, the imperius would have to have been placed upon Malfoy at the third task tonight. Considering

he was clearly not under the curse at the task I think we can assume this means that he was lying before also.”

Fudge frowned but nodded, “Mr. Potter, how can we know that you speak the truth. I think most are well aware there is no love lost between your self and Lucius’ son Draco. This would be an excellent opportunity to pay vengeance upon the boy.”

Harry shrugged, “I’d take Verisateum to testify to what I saw if I thought it would matter.”

Fudge nodded, “I will put in a request for an appointment this summer to verify your claims.”

Dumbledore added, “Cornelius I want you to rethink what I know you are doing. Lucius Malfoy will not protect you from the consequences of his actions forever, and if you part ways now you still may survive the implications.”

Fudge pulled a chair over to the bed, and for the first time noticed the growling black dog on the bed before he replied, “You know as well as I do that the testimony of a 14-year-old wizard, even if he is the boy-who-lived it won’t be enough to convict Lucius Malfoy.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I understand Cornelius, but this is your opportunity to free yourself of his influence and be the minister on your own terms. Prepare the ministry for war, prepare the public for Voldemort’s return, and tell them of his return.”

Fudge sighed, “I don’t think informing the world of his return would be wise Dumbledore. However, I will put more money into international auror recruitment and for the auror academy. More than this would require some tangible proof Albus, such as a public sighting.”

Dumbledore frowned but acquiesced, he had never had such luck in influencing Fudge. Of course being presented with proof from the boy-who-lived wasn’t without its share of influence on its own. Harry had watched the political exchange with interest, as had everyone else present before he continued his tale, “After Voldemort yelled at the death eaters he summoned for not seeking him sooner, he told me that he would duel me. He hit me with another *crucio* before the duel

even started. This one was shorter, but then we dueled for a few minutes and I had to dodge one killing curse before our wands connected. I assume it had something to do with having brother wands, but beyond that I really don't know."

Pain rippled through his body and Harry bit down on his lip so hard he drew blood before he continued, "The thing was, the wands connected and there was so much power. There was a giant golden cage that surrounded us and after a few minutes echoes of Voldemort's victims began to float out of his wand. First, it was an old caretaker at Riddle Manor, and then it was Bertha Jorkins." Harry swallowed the lump in his throat, "Then my mum came out of his wand...." Harry swallowed thickly again as Snuffles licked his hand as he whimpered. Remus had to lean against the wall as Harry finally managed to continue with tears rolling down his face, "My mum told me to hold for dad, she said they would help me."

Harry broke down slightly as the emotion of the moment became too much, the elder Grangers, Fudge, and the aurors felt as if they were intruding on something very private before Harry continued in a much more controlled voice, "My dad came out of the wand and he made me promise to keep living my life despite Voldemort. Then my mum kind of hugged me before they distracted Voldemort enough for me to break the connection. Fawkes came after that, and I really don't remember much following."

Hermione gently cooed into his ear as the adults walked to the other side of the room to quietly discuss the night's events. Harry had managed to settle enough to carry on a normal conversation after a couple of minutes with Hermione's hand running through his hair the only action commencing. Finally, Ron spoke from his seat by Harry's bed, "Well mate, at least you won the tournament and the galleons with it."

Hermione replied for Harry, "I swear to Merlin Ron, you have to have the emotional range of a teaspoon. How any girl will put up with you is beyond me."

Harry chuckled softly and for once Hermione was glad that Ron could make light of things in such a dark situation. Harry softly said,

“Honestly, it wasn’t any worse than down in the chamber. Of course, I needed Fawkes to save me again but better lucky than good.”

Hermione climbed up into the bed and wrapped his left arm into a gentle hug, taking care not to touch the still healing cut on his forearm. Finally she spoke, “Harry, I don’t think it’s very realistic to expect to beat Voldemort. He has fifty years of experience on you, and while you know a lot of magic, he has had much longer to learn his strengths as a wizard. All we can do is continue to work hard, and when the time is right you and Dumbledore can beat him, and make sure he stays dead this time.”

Ron’s eyes were wide, “Why would you want to beat V-Voldemort Harry?”

Harry looked his friend dead in the eye and replied, “I wish I could say that my intentions were completely pure, but I can’t. Seeing my mum and dad tonight, well I realized that Voldemort needs to be stopped for the last time and I’d like to do it for my mum and dad. He needs to be stopped so more families can’t be shattered, simply because the arrogant wanker wants to.”

Ron choked on his next words and Hermione softly said with a smile, “I think you’ve rendered Ron incapable of speech by calling Riddle an arrogant wanker.”

Harry grinned and replied, “As long as I haven’t made him lose his appetite.”

Ron blinked and replied, “Oy that’s not funny. Talking about my appetite like that, it’s insulting really.” He grinned and added, “There’s nothing that can make me lose my appetite mate.”

The three shared a laugh until one of the aurors approached the bed with a sack in his hands. Clearing his throat he sat the bag down on the bed and said, “Here are your winnings Mr. Potter. Congratulations on a good tournament.” Harry smiled slightly and nodded his thanks as the auror retreated back to the other adults.

In the ministry of magic a worker stamped the formal declaration clearing Sirius Black of all charges, and the memo to the muggle

crime enforcement at Scotland Yard that he had been cleared of all charges putting an end to the long manhunt for the man.

The man was about to send the messages off when a sound in a connecting room begged for his attention first. Rita Skeeter walked into the room and with a couple of duplicating charms she quietly walked out, this story would sell better than her stories about Potter earlier in the year.

At a small rickety looking house in Ottery St. Catchpole Molly Weasley continued to listen to the WWN for an update on Harry. She looked harrowed, scared, and more than a little guilty about the events of the year came weighing down on her conscience. Her ears perked when the song stopped mid-tune and a voice announced, "This just in Harry Potter has returned safely from an unknown site. Word from sources indicates that Mr. Potter looked to be in a frightful state, but without any life threatening injuries. Additionally, sources from within the ministry are confirming that long thought serial killer Sirius Black has been cleared of all charges when new evidence indicating he was framed by a man thought dead."

Molly gasped as the news continued to roll in, "Details are sketchy, but sources indicate the Peter Pettigrew was captured at some time tonight and when questioned found guilty of the crimes that Sirius Black had been thought guilty of. If you see Mr. Black please inform him of his exoneration while maintaining a safe distance. Repeat approach Mr. Black carefully, his mental state following years of unjust imprisonment is unknown. Thank you and we apologize for the interruption. Now back to you previously scheduled program."

Molly turned the WWN connection off as she began to mull over the news as it had just come in. With a sigh she knew what she needed to do, she needed to talk to Arthur and confirm the news before she could go any further.

The joyous news was finally revealed as Remus and Snuffles sat in the headmaster's office late in the night, even early into the next day. Dumbledore received an emergency owl delivery due to difficulties in floo calls from the news of the night.

Albus,

The paperwork has been filed, you can inform Black that he has been completely cleared and there will be no further formal inquiries.

Moody

A few moments later Remus and Snuffles were safely ensconced in the office as Dumbledore greeted them and said, "I'd like for you to be with us here Sirius."

A moment later Sirius was transformed into his human form with a quizzical look on his face, "Isn't this a risk Albus? I know that Pettigrew has been captured but I haven't been cleared yet."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he slid the piece of parchment across his desk and the pair of marauders read it quickly. Sirius' eyes belied his excitement and he said, "So, I can finally take guardianship of Harry just like James and Lily wanted me to?"

Dumbledore nodded, "You will need to obtain a signature from the Dursleys, renouncing their muggle guardianship rights. But, technically you have been Harry's wizarding guardian even while in Azkaban. I merely took the position over as a steward in your stead."

Dumbledore continued as he smiled at the excitement in the younger man's eyes build, "Your original wand will be retrieved, from the ministry's stores and if you wish you can resume your position as an auror."

Sirius began pacing as he thought about all of the options for his life, almost as if he had been born again from the ashes of his former life just like a phoenix. Finally he settled on saying, "I don't think I want to work for the ministry ever again, and to be honest I never really needed to work in the first place. At the time I was just trying to make a difference. Now, I have the option of making a difference by giving Harry the kind of home he deserves and I'd like to start a family of my own before I get too old."

Remus held a hand to his heart in mock surprise, "What's this, Sirius Black wants to start a family? I never thought the day would come."

Sirius grinned, "Sod off Moony, or I'll start telling my cousin about some of the embarrassing stuff you did here at Hogwarts."

Remus grinned as he shook his head, "Touché my friend, touché." Turning to Dumbledore he asked, "I assume you want to keep the place under *fidelus*?"

Dumbledore nodded, "With Tom back we must utilize every advantage at our disposal. I believe that there may be need for others to take up residence for this summer at the bare minimum. Sadly several order members have allowed their own homes to become targets too great for Tom and his deatheaters to pass up."

Sirius sighed heavily and groaned, "You both had over a decade of peace before this all started again, and I go from one war to another."

Remus reached over and squeezed Sirius' shoulder in sympathy before he said, "Well, we best get going. I hope the guest quarters are still available tonight?"

Dumbledore nodded, "I will have a house elf wake you at dawn so that you may say your goodbyes to Harry. We will organize accommodations with the Dursleys in the next two days so that you can accompany Harry from King's Cross."

Sirius yawned as he stood before he followed Remus from the headmaster's office, neither noticed Dumbledore reach over to his pensieve and pull a specific vial of memory from a hidden compartment in the wall. Fawkes flashed into the room and took up residence on his roost before Dumbledore said, "Well Fawkes, I'm telling Harry the prophecy tomorrow evening. I hope that he reacts to it as I expect he will. Without Harry, all of this will be for naught."

Harry awoke the next morning and to his surprise Hermione was snuggled into his side with her arm draped across his chest. Reaching over he grabbed his glasses and slid them over his nose to reveal Remus, Sirius, and the Grangers watching the pair with an amused expressions.

Harry smiled and then his brain froze, Sirius was walking around in broad daylight. Harry hissed, "Sirius, what are you doing? You haven't been cleared yet. They need to give you a trial."

Sirius grinned, a smile the likes of which Harry had only seen once before, as they spoke in the courtyard the night of the time turner adventure. He softly said, "Don't worry kiddo, I've been cleared. Moony and I just wanted to say our goodbyes before we escorted Michael and Bianca here back to their house."

Harry felt a much weaker tremor shoot down his nerved before he gently shook Hermione awake. She gave him a sleepy smile before she asked, "How are you feeling?"

Harry grinned, "All things considered pretty good." Looking down and giving her a conspiratorial wink he said, "I think your mum and dad might want to say good bye."

Hermione arched an eyebrow before she slowly raised her gave to her parents who were grinning at her impishly. Mortified she buried her face in the pillow before she pulled away and said in an overly cheery voice, "Morning mum and dad."

Michael laughed, "Morning to you sweets. We'll be seeing you in a few days and we'll try to arrange some vacation plans for August." Turning to Harry he added, "You are more then welcome to join us Harry. But, we'll worry about all of that later. Come here and give us a hug Hermione Jane."

Sirius grinned and added, "You too Harry James, come here and give us a hug."

Rolling out of bed the pajama clad pair swiftly closed the distance and hugs were spread around. Remus and Sirius got a bit carried away and ended up hugging everyone, and Harry suddenly saw the eerie similarity between the marauders and the twins. With a sudden flash of inspiration Harry's eyes panned across the room to the bag of galleons on his bedside. Suddenly he had a very good idea on how to spend the galleons, and he knew the end result would be well worth it.

As the adults left the castle the young Gryffindors took the clean clothes from Dobby and Winky that the elves had left the previous night, and they showered in opposite sex bathrooms in the connecting room of the hospital wing.

Walking with hand entwined into the great hall, Harry was greeted with a standing ovation as he worked his way to the Gryffindor table. A few students tried to walk over to the table but were stopped as Dumbledore stood, "Congratulations to Mr. Potter on his victory in the tournament. You have made Hogwarts proud. As for the rest of you, please leave Mr. Potter be, he has no wish to be harassed by the same students who harassed him earlier in the year for his very entry into the tournament." Harry was pleased to see several students wince; while it wasn't a widely known fact, Harry had a very good memory against those that had wronged him for no apparent reason. The list was still quite long from the heir of Slytherin nonsense a couple of years ago and this year had only expanded that list.

Dumbledore continued despite Harry's musings, "Additionally, as many of you have already surmised our friends from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang are preparing to head back to their own respective homes today. If any students here are interested, we will be bidding our guests a fond farewell after lunch, on the grounds near the lake. "

Seamus was the first Gryffindor to ask Harry about the events of the previous night, "Oy Harry, where did that portkey take you?"

A tremor passed through Harry's body and everyone looked at him strangely aside from Hermione and Ron who were looking in sympathy. Finally, he replied, "You know it's funny, I might as well have had the plague after my name came out of the goblet. I could count those people on two hands who didn't immediately think I had placed my name in the goblet. Of those that thought like that only Ron took the time to apologize for being wrong. Frankly, you all acted like a bunch of self serving Slytherins. So why then do you possibly think I would tell you anything?"

Seamus frowned and several faces at the Gryffindor table flushed with shame at being told off, and for Harry being exactly right about it.

Hermione rolled her eyes at her housemates, the majority of whom were feeling sorry for themselves instead of actually feeling contrite. She darkly muttered, "Truth hurts doesn't it, you bunch of bloody sheep." Harry merely arched an eyebrow, his feelings had already been made quite apparent, but he wasn't aware that Hermione felt the same. Of course, considering their childhoods, which involved more than their share of being mistreated by peers he supposed it made sense.

An owl flew into the great hall as they quietly ate breakfast, Minerva McGonagall could see that a divide had been formed in her house by the events of the year. Truth be told, she completely sided with Harry and his group of friends, but she refused to accept that her house would be divided. She would be talking to her house tonight before they all left, some things couldn't be left to fester.

Harry pulled the letter from the owl's leg and unfurled it to read:

Harry,

Please meet me in my office after dinner tonight. We must discuss something of importance.

A.P.W.B.D

Harry glanced up at Dumbledore and they shared a nod, before Hermione asked, "What did the letter say Harry?"

Harry merely replied, "Meeting with Dumbledore tonight." Hermione nodded and as breakfast was finished the majority of the students went outside to enjoy the early summer weather. Harry watched as the twins walked towards Gryffindor tower, deciding to get the task out of the way he followed them as he left Hermione with a promise to see her in the tower in a few minutes.

Finally catching the twins as they slowly took their own circuitous route to Gryffindor tower he pulled them into an empty classroom despite their protests and said, "Hey, I have a proposition for you two."

Fred and George shared a look, both were immediately interested as Harry continued, "I know you two were talking about starting a joke shop after you graduate from Hogwarts. If I give you my winnings from the tournament to cover your losses on the bet with Bagman, and there should be another five hundred galleons there to start building an inventory for your shop when you graduate. In exchange, I'd like to be a silent partner and have first dibs on some product development ideas of my own, and a five percent share of the profits. My ideas should offset any differences in the long term well-being of the shop."

Fred and George both shrugged and Fred spoke, "Sure mate, but we'll give you 15 of the profits. Any loans we would get would have us in debt before we even started. This way we can also make some money next year with the products we make. As it was we're both only taking three classes next year."

George nodded solemnly, "yes 25 and not a knut less. After all, endorsement from the boy-who-lived and tri-wizard champion should be worth some sales on its own."

Harry arched his eyebrow, "There won't be any outright endorsements except on products I design."

Fred smiled, "Understandable dear partner but I agree with my less handsome twin, 25 is a fair split of the profits."

Harry shrugged, "You do realize that if I'm a prefect I'll have to appear as though I don't approve."

George grinned, "Oh don't worry Harrykins we can be invisible when we want to be."

Harry nodded as he pulled the sack of galleons from his pocket and tossed them to Fred, "It's a deal then. But, remember don't bring this up in front of Hermione I'll be the one to break the news to her." The twins saluted as Harry grinned and walked out of the room, heading towards the tower to begin packing for the trip tomorrow.

Harry entered the common room and those present widely looked away, their ears still ringing from the dressing down they had

received earlier. Ginny, Neville, and Ron were all in the far corner as Neville and Ron played some chess to pass the time. Harry approached them and asked, "Hey guys, where's Hermione?"

Ron never glanced up from the board as he replied, "She's up packing already. Barking I tell you, what's she going to do this afternoon?"

Harry shrugged and said, "I'm going to get packed too, are you guys going down to give the other schools a send off?"

They all nodded and Harry went up to the fourth year boy's dorm to finish the majority of his packing so that he could enjoy a quiet morning before he boarded the train.

Opening his trunk Harry was surprised to see Gryffindor's sword in scabbard sitting on the top of his clothing. A small note was stuck to it using a sticking charm:

Harry,

The sword is now yours as it was your fathers and his father before him. I couldn't have rightfully given you a sword first year, could I? Take the time to train at your swordplay, sometimes problems require a more blunt solution than magic often provides.

A.P.W.B.D.

Harry sighed as he used shrinking charms liberally in order to fit everything into his trunk, making sure to leave a set of pajamas and a change of clothes for tomorrow draped over the top of the trunk. Harry planned on getting a new trunk over the summer in order to carry more while he was at Hogwarts, but learning some very powerful locking charms would be in order.

An hour and a half passed quickly as Harry finally walked back down to the common room, sighting Hermione in the corner with the others, although she was firmly entrenched in a book from the sight of things. As he approached Ron said, "Oy Harry, we're trying to organize a pick-up Quidditch match this afternoon, are you in for seeker?"

Harry grinned, "That sounds great. Who all is playing?"

Ron replied after a moment's thought, "Well I guess anyone who has a broom can play actually. We'll probably try to get some Hufflepuffs to play, maybe a rematch of the Quidditch match from last year. This time though no dementors and I'll take Wood's spot."

Harry nodded as Hermione pulled the book down enough so that her eye roll could be clearly spotted. Scooping Hermione up into his arms he plopped back down into the chair as she played at indignance before settling into a position with her legs draped over the arm of the chair as she leaned into Harry's shoulder.

Every few minutes Hermione would lean back and kiss the tip of Harry's nose or give him a peck on the lips. In her world a boyfriend who didn't bother her when she read was better than his weight on gold. Harry, for his part merely watched the chess match and would lean over and catch a few bits from the transfiguration book Hermione was reading as they passed the time until lunch.

Finally around noon Ron's stomach let out a grumble as Ginny said, "Uh oh sounds like it's lunch time."

Ron gave his sister a mock scowl before he agreed, "Yeah, I reckon it wouldn't hurt to have some lunch."

They all laughed at this and left the chess board and Hermione's book in their little corner, which had become the unspoken roosting spot for the golden trio plus two. After a pleasant and relatively quick lunch the majority of the school walked out onto the grounds and said their goodbyes to friends made over the course of the year.

Harry first talked to Krum, the Bulgarian had been completely vindicated in his role during the third task, but the most interesting side plot for the Durmstrang students was the disappearance of their headmaster following the third task. With Karkaroff AWOL, the deputy head was in charge and he was a far less imposing presence than the other man.

Krum smiled at Harry, one of the few he was willing to smile in the presence of, "I haff enjoyed this year very much Harry. You should take care of Her-my-nee, she is a very special girl."

Harry nodded, "I appreciate that Viktor and any time you need a friend just send me an owl and I'll have your back."

Viktor nodded and moved over to Hermione and they shared a brief conversation where they agreed to become pen pals. Viktor knew that he had no chance to be with Hermione, so he would take what he could get in her friendship.

Fleur was next for Harry, and surprisingly enough Bill Weasley was there also. Harry arched his eyebrow and asked, "Bill?"

Bill nodded, he looked much like the pictures Harry had seen over the years, the epitome of cool, "Yeah, and you must be the famous Harry Potter. I saw Fred and George praising you earlier."

Harry grinned and Bill raised his hands, "I don't want to know why. It might make me an unknowing accomplice."

Harry chuckled as he turned to Fleur, "It was nice to meet you this year Fleur."

Fleur smiled beautifully and replied, "Ze pleasure has been mine 'Arry. You are already a great wizard; I look forward to meeting you again."

Harry smiled as Fleur gave him a proper French farewell, kisses on both cheeks, before he turned back to Bill, "So are you two?"

Bill merely grinned, "Actually, she is being recruited by Gringott's in Paris as a curse breaker." Glancing around in a conspiratorial whisper and added, "But, by the end of the orientation I have to take her through we'll see."

Harry laughed and Bill patted him on the back, just as if they had been friends their entire lives. Hermione walked up with a bemused expression on her face, "Was that Bill?" Harry nodded, "You two seemed rather chummy."

Harry grinned, "What can I say, us cool blokes just gravitate together."

Hermione snorted, "If you say so Harry." She leaned up and gave him a quick kiss before she asked, "Anyone else you wanted to see?"

Harry shook his head, "Nah, I guess I only made two friends this year; pretty sad really."

Hermione grinned at him cheekily, this wasn't the demeanor of your typical person the day after confronting Lord Voldemort, but then again Harry wasn't a typical person. She consoled him, "Well we have been rather busy this year, so I guess it's understandable. I only made friends with Viktor and a nice girl from Beauxbatons named Monique."

Harry wrapped his arm around Hermione and pulled her close as they first watched the great winged Abraxan of Beauxbatons take flight. Shortly thereafter the great vessel of Durmstrang dipped underwater and with one last lazy wave from the giant squid they were gone and the great experiment had ended.

The afternoon Quidditch match was a festive affair as an unofficial rematch of the Dementor match from third year was held between Gryffindor House and Hufflepuff house. Unlike the last time Harry managed to capture the snitch after about twenty minutes, Gryffindor winning 270-120 with Ron making a fair show for his first match as keeper.

As they finished up their dinner, the food tasting bland as it was overwhelmed by the excitement of being the last night in the castle for a few months. Harry glanced up at the head table and Dumbledore merely nodded as they both exited the hall at the same time and shared a quiet trip to the headmaster's office.

Upon entering the office Harry immediately knew that whatever news the headmaster had to share it wasn't going to be of the pleasant variety.

As they held a long staring contest from their chairs Dumbledore finally spoke, "I have something to show you. Something which I fear will make your life even more difficult in the coming years."

Harry nodded as Dumbledore stood and motioned Harry over to the pensieve. Looking confused Harry asked, "What is it sir?"

Dumbledore sighed, "It was over fifteen years ago and I was interviewing a young witch for the open position as Divination professor here at Hogwarts. I had rented a spare room at the Hogshead tavern to hold the interview. The witch's grandmother was a highly documented seer, so I humored the woman out of respect for her grandmother. After a very bland interview I was prepared to end the interview when she gave a real prophecy. That was the day that Sybill Trelawney gave the first of her prophecies.

Dumbledore swirled the silver fluid in his pensieve before he muttered, "*Projectus*" and watched as a three dimensional image appeared.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... And the Dark Lord will mark him as equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives."

JK Rowling Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix Ch. 37

To be honest Harry wasn't terribly surprised at the prophecy. In fact, the only thing that puzzled him was the mysterious power the dark lord knows not. Dumbledore watched Harry pensively until the teenager finally spoke, "Why is it that you have known this prophecy since before I was born and yet you still placed me with the Dursleys?"

Dumbledore blinked, this wasn't the reaction he had expected, he had thought there would be some anger and resentment but that they would be washed away in the face of disbelief and despair. After gathering himself he replied, "We have had this conversation before, it was the place of the best protection available."

Harry shook his head, "If you believe the prophecy then you also would have to believe that only Voldemort would kill me. You could have placed me with another family under an assumed name and at least attempted to prepare me for this battle against Voldemort."

Dumbledore firmly replied, "I didn't want you to grow up with such a burden. I wanted you to have a childhood."

Harry's voice was cold, "You want to talk about burdens, try growing up and not knowing your name until you turn five. Try growing up without friends because your fat assed cousin scares them away and your aunt and uncle spread rumors that you're a criminal. Or how about growing up thinking your parents were drunks that died because of you."

Dumbledore's eyes widened as Harry just began to build some steam, "Who makes you the one to decide that I have to live that life?"

Too startled to do much more than breathe the old wizard replied, "I placed you with your aunt and uncle to protect you Harry, it was for the greater good. Prophecies are notoriously vague and I shuddered to think of risking your life for the chance of more happiness."

Harry snorted, "Remember after the whole philosopher's stone debacle first year. I asked you why Voldemort was after me, why he wanted to kill me as a baby. You could have told me then and I could have prepared for this. I may not have been happy with you, but I could have come to understand it."

Dumbledore was growing desperate, "I had your best interests in mind Harry, I did not do these things out of malice, but out of love."

Harry narrowed his eyes and tilted his head as his glasses slid down to the edge of his nose, "If that is what you do for someone you love, I'd really not want to see what you do to those you hate."

Harry stood and walked to the door before he turned to Dumbledore and replied, "It's not for me to decide what penance you pay for being such a callous old man. I'll let my mum and dad deal with you when the time comes. Good night Professor."

Dumbledore frowned but didn't stop Harry aside from to say, "Harry", the teenage wizard turned, "I understand why you are upset and I won't ask for your forgiveness, but I will work to earn it from you. All I can do however is promise that I will not withhold information from you about you anymore. I pray that you can some day find it in your heart to look at me without malice."

Harry sighed as he quietly replied, "I don't hate you sir, but I'm pretty sure I'll have a hard time respecting you ever again." Harry's words acted as a physical blow to the old wizard as he turned and left the office, the door shutting behind him with a soft click. Dumbledore wasn't crying, but he was looking decidedly ill from what could be seen around his beard. The war against Voldemort just took a rather unexpected turn.

Harry returned to the castle and with a soft kiss for Hermione he simply said, "I'm not feeling too well. I think I am going to turn in for the night." Before she could ponder his words any further he had disappeared up the staircase, the mystery remaining until tomorrow at the very least.

By the time Hermione had awoken she found Harry already prepared for the trip, his trunk already long gone with Dobby's aid. He smiled at her and said, "Good morning."

With a discerning eye she said, "You look like you didn't sleep well last night. Are you alright?"

Harry nodded, "Yeah I've just been thinking about some stuff. I'll tell you about it soon, I promise." Hermione accepted this and with a little persuasion from Harry Winky appeared and took her trunk to the express, making the morning considerably less stressful with the one simple action.

As they rumbled down the path to Hogsmeade Hermione still hadn't gotten anything from Harry on why he was acting so closed off. Deciding to take drastic measures she leaned over and proceeded to give Harry a very steamy kiss. After she pulled away she asked, "Feeling better?"

Harry grinned, "I feel fine Hermione, but that did make me feel better."

Hermione sighed, "I wish you'd tell me what is bothering you."

Harry wrapped an arm around her and ignored Ron's snickering on the other side of the carriage as he said, "I promise you'll be the first person I talk to when I'm done thinking about it myself. It isn't just one thing thought...love."

Harry eyed her warily, the topic of pet names hadn't really been broached before and she simply smiled sweetly in response. No longer fearing for his life he continued, "That's all I'll probably do in my week at the Dursleys is think. I mean Sirius will be around for a few days, but I'll steer clear of my aunt, uncle, and Dudley. I won't be that hard up for conversation." Hermione rolled her eyes but couldn't stifle the small giggle that escaped her lips.

Ron shook his head ruefully and in a mock emotional voice said, "I never thought I'd see the day, Hermione giggling."

Hermione reached across the carriage and swatted his arm, "Maybe if you ever said anything funny I might giggle more Ronald."

Ron raised his hands in a placating gesture, "Ok, I'm sorry Ms. G...iggles." They all shared a laugh this time as the carriage finally stopped at the station and students began piling out of carriages.

They managed to find an empty compartment with no difficulty and the five of them settled into carrying positions. Ron was reading the newest issue of *Quidditch Monthly*, Ginny and Neville were sitting with their shoulders touching as they read *Teen Witch Weekly*. Harry and Hermione were cuddled on the bench, neither having got much sleep the previous night, and they were on the way to taking a light nap with Hermione burrowed into Harry's chest.

It was a quiet compartment as the train rumbled through Scotland for a time before it chugged into the English countryside. Harry and Hermione had both fallen into a light but comfortable sleep as Ron had challenged Neville to a chess match with his manhood at stake from being publicly ridiculed for reading *Teen Witch Weekly*.

The door to the compartment slowly slid open and for once a solitary Draco Malfoy sauntered into their compartment. Ron made to move

but Malfoy was glaring disinterestedly at Harry and Hermione napping on the bench. Ron's eyes narrowed and he quietly asked, "What do you want Ferret boy?"

Draco smirked, "Just a quick word with Potter if you don't mind."

Ron frowned but didn't move as Draco simply said, "Potter, I need a word."

Harry's light sleep was disrupted by Draco Malfoy's regular speaking voice and he blinked his eyes open. Looking at the Slytherin with something akin to distaste he replied, "Give me a second. Hermione could use the sleep."

Malfoy rolled his eyes but complied as Harry carefully peeled himself away before flicking his wand to conjure a pillow that mostly replaced his own body. Walking out into the aisle of the train he asked in an irritable tone, "What is it Malfoy?"

Malfoy didn't have any of his normal bravado as he simply said, "I know he's back Potter. I received word from my father late last night. But, I want you to know something. I'll never be my father, because I won't serve the dark lord."

Harry blinked before he asked, "I'm suppose to believe this because?"

Draco shrugged, "Call it pride on my part and maybe just a tinge of respect for you. We're enemies Potter and I think a certain amount of respect is shared between enemies even if there is no love lost."

Harry sighed and shrugged, "So what do you want me to do about it?"

Malfoy merely shrugged, "You don't have to do anything about it. I was just clearing the air before it got muddled up by what someone else told you to believe."

Harry nodded and asked, "So we're enemies but you don't want me dead?"

Malfoy nodded, "I have too much fun tormenting you Scarhead, why would I want you dead?"

Harry managed a small smile, "I'm touched I guess." With a marauderesque grin Harry said, "If it is a war you want, then it is a war you shall get."

Malfoy merely smirked and gave Harry a jaunty salute before turning on heel and heading to the opposite side of the train. Harry ran a hand through his hair and sighed, "Well that was unexpected."

Harry returned to the compartment and he noticed Hermione was still sleeping. Ron had a strange expression on his face and asked, "What did Malfoy want?"

Harry simply replied, "Oh we decided to be best friend's mate, sorry looks like you're out of a job." Noticing the look on Ron's face he sighed, "Bloody hell Ron, he's Malfoy what do you think?"

Ron arched an eyebrow but didn't comment further as Harry glanced out the window, "Bugger, less than an hour until we get back to King's Cross. Reckon I better wake Hermione up."

Reaching over he caressed Hedwig's beak as she preened in her cage. She hooted affectionately and nipped at his finger before Harry smiled and she went back to her task.

As they exited the express for the end of their fourth year they spotted Snuffles and the Grangers just inside the barrier. Hugs and a few sloppy licks were traded around before they parted ways. As Harry walked towards the Dursleys he murmured to Sirius, "How many veins do you think Uncle Vernon can manage to pop out of his neck this time? I say five."

Snuffles barked twice and Harry laughed, "Ha, you don't know Uncle Vernon very well do you?"

As they silently followed Vernon and Petunia to the car Harry sighed, he had a lot to think about in the next week.

A/N: There it is part one of my series. I'll be taking a break from this series for a couple of weeks to lavish some sorely needed attention on my other two series. I should be back to the sequel before Valentine's Day.

I hope you all liked Harry's reaction to Dumbledore this time. He still had some serious anger bottled up, but instead of destroying Dumbledore's office he attacked the man; Oftentimes a much more effective approach when dealing with people.

This was originally going to be two chapters, but after some complaints about a built in chapter break to prevent one of such size I'll leave it up to the readers. This beast is near 10 k in length and 17 pages of word on 10 pt type. Would you all like one bigger chapter, where I'll update less frequently, but when I do the chapters will be closer to 10k in words? Or, would you like two updates with chapters between 5k and 6k in length?

As for the question of the chapter:

Without having the foresight to know what the seventh book will be, what was your biggest issue with how HBP turned out? Was it Dumbledore's death? Was it the state of the ships at the end of the story? Was it how much of a weakling Harry appeared to be at the end of the chapter? Really there are so many potential reasons, but if you give me yours I'll give you one of mine.

Thanks to all of you that have reviewed and thanks for reading. I'll see you in a few weeks when I start the sequel.